

THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

THE ICED PATH

A HANSEL AND GRETEL RETELLING
KAYLA ESHBAUGH

THE
ICED
PATH



KAYLA ESHBAUGH

Copyright © 2024 by Kayla Eshbaugh

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author,
except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

CONTENTS

Dedication

- [1. The Cursed Kingdom Chronicles Series Prologue](#)
- [2. Chapter One](#)
- [3. Chapter Two](#)
- [4. Chapter Three](#)
- [5. Chapter Four](#)
- [6. Chapter Five](#)
- [7. Chapter Six](#)
- [8. Chapter Seven](#)
- [9. Chapter Eight](#)
- [10. Chapter Nine](#)
- [11. Chapter Ten](#)
- [12. Chapter Eleven](#)
- [13. Chapter Twelve](#)
- [14. Chapter Thirteen](#)
- [15. Chapter Fourteen](#)
- [16. Chapter Fifteen](#)
- [17. Chapter Sixteen](#)
- [18. Chapter Seventeen](#)
- [19. Chapter Eighteen](#)
- [20. Chapter Nineteen](#)
- [21. Chapter Twenty](#)
- [22. Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[23. Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[24. Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[25. Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[26. Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[27. Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[28. Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[29. Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[30. Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[31. Chapter Thirty](#)

[32. Epilogue](#)

[Also by Kayla Eshbaugh](#)

[The Christmas Chronicles](#)

[Fullpage image](#)

Dedicated to Theron.

May you always remember to limit your candy intake, work hard for your dreams,
make life fun, and may you never forget who you truly are.



THE CURSED KINGDOM

CHRONICLES SERIES PROLOGUE

Once upon a time, there was a land crafted from magic. From the very sky to the depths of the deepest seas of Terra, magic could be found. Humans and magical beings roamed these lands. Humans raised up kingdoms, multiplied their people, and built grand castles and cities. Magical beings and humans lived in harmony together. There was a specific group of magical beings that cared for every living thing, magical or not. This race blessed all life and helped all to grow and prosper under both the light of the sun and the glow of the moon. They were called the Ancients.

“Ancients” was the name humans gave these magical people, for they were said to have been around from the time the world began. It was believed they could go between worlds, and that they dwelt in the very heavens where the creator lived.

Prosperity grew and wealth was abundant on Terra for a long time. Yet, eventually, every precious gem had been mined and every ounce of gold stripped from the lands. Humans sought after more, searching for other riches and treasures. But the world had given all there was to give. Still, the humans hungered. Eventually, these humans, unsatisfied with all that their world could give them, sought to take the magic for themselves.

The curse upon the ten Kingdoms of Terra all began with *one man*, it is believed—but there were whispers of greed and desire long before that boy's birth. Something had already stirred, perhaps setting the stage for a *traitor* to be born.

In the highest mountains of Haleston, Prince Falcon, at a very young age, fell in love with an Ancient girl, but his love was not returned. Try as he might to win her, she would not marry him—would not love him in return. Prince Falcon grew bitter and hard, and when it was his time to rule his father's kingdom, he made a vow to extinguish all magic from the world.

But not all kingdoms agreed with the traitor, King Falcon. Other kingdoms formed an alliance of their own against him and his followers. There were seven kingdoms who aligned themselves with the traitor king. Four kingdoms pledged their allegiance to the Ancients and three chose no side at all, neither aiding the magical beings, nor the traitors.

Then the great war began. Darkness swept over every kingdom. The very air of Terra seemed to change with such bitter greed and hatred; it became thick and wet. Illness was rampant, causing many to die. The very soil and ground shook in anger at such a betrayal of the ancients who had cared for all life on Terra. Plants would not grow. Water tasted stale. Many human cities, villages, and towns were lost to the storms that raged throughout the lands and to the roaring seas which flooded inland, to the mountains, in rage, swallowing up many betrayers.

War raged on; battles covered every land. The sun grew red, tinted in the blood of the fallen. Everyday, more precious life and lands were destroyed. The blood that saturated the soil, and the death that clung to the air, continued to poison the people, but still, they fought.

Then, when the battle reached the highest mountain peak in the Kingdom of Haleston, where the traitor, King Falcon, ruled, icy winds blew, and an Ancient by the name of Draken fought against the traitor king. There on that mountain, drenched in the blood of both of their people, Draken took the very life out of the king, and vowed that he would curse all the human heirs from all the royal lines. Every kingdom which had betrayed his people, would pay for the blood they had shed.

On his own mountain, the traitor king died with malice and hate still dripping from his lips.

There are other stories, though, other tales of the traitor king. These other tales say that he did not die upon that mountain—no, but that he was transformed. It was said, in some kingdoms, that he turned into darkness itself—into a being which had no light, no form, no shape, but only a mist that destroyed whatever it touched. Others believed that the Ancient, Draken, cast the traitor king inside of the mountain, locking him up deep within, buried under the weight of what he had done, trapped inside the very soil and rocks which hated him. With his own blood, and that of his people, the oath and vow Draken made was sealed, and the corrupted King was imprisoned forever, in misery.

Despite the different tales of the traitor king, all of the human royalty of Terra *are* cursed upon their birth. Draken, the ancient who stood on that mountain and defeated the traitor king, kept his vow, and he did curse all the heirs of each of the seven kingdoms, who had killed his people, as well as the three other kingdoms who stood with no one. For, not choosing a side, is not knowing what you believe, and some say that the three kingdoms who didn't choose a side in the Great War were worse than the seven who had destroyed the world, because they watched it happen, and yet they did nothing at all.

CHAPTER ONE

Gretel



The cold wind whipped through the brittle tree branches, causing them to groan and snap as they shivered against each other before me. The ice clung to the trees' bending boughs, creating an arch of sharp icicles at the entrance, which gave the impression of walking into the mouth of some terrible glacial beast, instead of a benign forest. The icy road, named the Iced Path, which led into the haunted forest of Haleston was always frozen solid, even when at Haleston's border, there was no snow upon the ground.

I stood just outside that haunted forest, waiting for it to frighten me as it had so many others. I hoped that it would scare me, scare me just enough so I would not do as I knew I must. So, there I remained until the sun dipped out of sight, casting the forest into deep shadows that stretched like grotesque arms and clawing hands upon the white, snow-covered ground.

Although it was a horrible-looking forest, and the noises within it caused the hair on the back of my neck to stand on end, I did not falter. *That* was a disappointment. I truly wished to be weak at that moment. I wished to be the little, innocent girl who most people thought I was when they looked at my small frame and stature. I was nineteen years old, but most people thought I was nearer to twelve. I hated it.

Perhaps, my strength and stubbornness came because I wanted to prove people wrong. Throughout my entire life, I had been underestimated. The people, including my family, were fearful that my size made me weaker than most. My father and brother never let me do the things I wished because they were afraid for me.

There, staring into the haunted forest, from which most ran in fear of its creaks and groans, I stood, prepared to enter on the night of Ancient magic. The first night when the lights appeared in the sky. It was the one night when those souls who were filled with real intent to prove their worth could enter. There were, of course, many rumors as to what went on inside that forest, but as far as anyone knew, no one had ever returned once they entered.

The reward and possibility of having the chance to live within the enchanted village at the other side of the haunted forest was what tempted people to try their luck. I'd heard the wails of mothers, sisters, brothers, wives, and children as they

waited for their loved ones to return from the Iced Path, but they never did.

Foolish, I always thought.

I knew, firsthand, of their pain because my pain was the same. The haunted forest had lured not only my father, but also my brother, with its empty promises of a better life in that mythical, enchanted village. Father believed that everyone who entered the haunted woods made it through and were too happy to ever return home again.

The plan they had concocted was that I would go the year after my brother did. That day had come. I did not believe as my father did, although I hoped I was wrong. *Are my father and brother really in the enchanted village? Or are they, actually, somewhere else, lost in the forest?* Those questions pestered me and were the reasons I was there, standing firm. I needed to know what happened to them. I wanted to save them.

“Are you entering the forest on the night of Ancient magic?” a voice echoed through the trees as a breeze caused the ice to crack again upon their branches. I turned around, looking up and down the trail, which led to the edge of the haunted forest.

Have I been followed?

No. There was no one there.

I looked back into the deep forest.

Did I just hear the forest speak?

“I wonder if you will make it through,” the voice said, seemingly full of air. “This forest is dangerous—You should stay away.”

If I entered, would I be haunted by spirits, trying to sway me? If so, that would be my first chance to make it known to whatever haunted the forest—whatever lay beyond—who I was.

“I know of its danger. Even if I am afraid—which I am not saying I am—but if I am afraid, I will remain braver than any fear,” I called out.

There was no more voice, and I sighed, pulling on the hood of my gray coat after feeling a slight chill in my defeated and weary bones.

I turned and left.

The next evening, I would be back, and I would find the answers I sought, or I would die trying.

CHAPTER TWO

Cole



It was easy for me to cause my voice to slide along and then curl into the wind. I had done it for as long as I could remember. At the edge of the wood, near the sign that either warded people off or challenged them to test their luck on the night of Ancient magic, there was a maiden glaring into my wilderness home as if the very existence of my forest offended her. I stopped under a tree, knowing I was not visible, and watched her. She did not move, not for some time, only glared harder as the sun left and shadows moved upon the ground, stretching out as if they had been asleep for far too long. There she remained, unmoving.

Curious.

The haunted forest, as the humans called it, was my home. Year after year, those humans competed for the honor to live in the enchanted village, a place of peace and rest, where humans guarded the Traitor's Pass from anyone who might attempt to awaken the traitor King Falcon, who was locked deep within the mountain. Only the most worthy and the purest of souls could enter, lest they be tempted to free the traitor within his mountainous prison. The haunted forest was vital to the balance of Terra, and it stood to weed out the good humans from the bad.

So many humans failed, and they forfeited their souls as they vied for the opportunity to dwell within the forest. However, there was something about *that* maiden that gave me pause, so I reached out upon the wind to speak to her, even though she had not yet entered into the forest. I usually only bothered myself with the humans who were already within the forest, to scare them off, as Ancient Vera advised me to do in order to dissuade the weakest of souls. Sometimes, I could tell from simply looking at a person if they were strong enough to endure my home, the haunted woods.

That particular maiden was small, and yet she did not cower in fear. She seemed angry toward what had made so many others run away in terror.

Curious.

Not only had she heard me, but she did not scream and turn away in fright. Most who heard my voice, when I let it curl within the wind, quickly abandoned their dreams and left.

Not that maiden, though; she answered back, and her voice seemed to indicate that she felt obligated to enter, even though she did not wish to.

I smiled, knowing that if she never made it to the other side of the forest, she would become trapped within the woods, and that would mean I could figure out where that fire inside of her came from.

I could not wait to haunt her.

CHAPTER THREE

Gretel



“**Y**ou can do this. You *must* do this. You cannot just sit here in this cottage, rotting away,” I said to myself as I paced back and forth within the small front room of my family’s home. It was in desperate need of repairs, but what was the point when I was leaving, never to return? I stopped pacing and took a deep breath. I was afraid. Only a fool would *not* be afraid when entering the unknown, but I was more afraid of remaining there in Haleston and never knowing what had happened to my family than what could possibly happen to me in the forest. I held on to that, even when I doubted everything. I looked out the window, and the sun began to fall behind the mountains, reminding me that time was running out. I couldn’t stall much longer.

I don’t want to leave.

While walking through the village square that morning after harvesting the last of the chestnuts, I noticed the decorations for the holiday season. It was always my favorite time of year. I had fond memories of dragging in evergreen boughs and picking the white flowers down at the creek to dress them. I loved placing the boughs above the fireplace and in the window ledges of our small cottage. Hans and Father would spend long days picking up fallen chestnuts, bringing them home, and then husking them in the evening by the fire as we told spooky stories. I oversaw preparing the chestnuts for roasting, cleaning them, scoring them, then soaking them as our special family recipe required.

I was the youngest daughter of the Carol family. We were chestnut farmers and had been for six generations, going back to even before the Great War. The Carol family was rumored to have once been nobility, but I found that hard to believe as I looked over our rundown home and humble farm. However, our family had owned the chestnut fields for as long as anyone knew. Maybe we were biased, but no one ever made roasted chestnuts as good as the Carols did. I was proud of our family and of our history. Our rumored nobility was the main reason why two years ago, when my father wanted to find a “better life for us,” he journeyed into the haunted forest. I tried my hardest to make him see that our life in Haleston was good. Still, he kept saying that there was “more to life than harvesting chestnuts, simply

because our family had always done so.”

But what else was he looking for? We were good at our trade. Why give up on a skill our ancestors blessed us with?

He could not be dissuaded, and instead of listening to me, he began to make a plan, a plan I needed to complete on that day. I looked about the small room as my memories faded away.

Being left alone was challenging. I tried to take care of the orchards; however, it was a lot of work for one person. So many of the nuts went bad as I could not gather them all. I was harvesting our crop and selling as much as I could to make ends meet for myself. I hated the prickly burs and had to use my father’s or my brother’s old, oversized gloves to protect my hands, which added to the difficulty. Eventually, I discovered that if I stomped on them just right, the bur would release the nut and make it much easier to remove.

Will I ever see our orchard again?

Focus on today. Make sure you have everything you need, I answered myself.

I filled a sack with unroasted chestnuts. Even if I did not go through all the secret recipe steps of the Carol family while in the haunted woods, which included soaking them before eating them, they would keep me alive in a pinch, even raw. I packed a second much smaller sack of husked and roasted chestnuts.

During my final trip to the village market, I couldn’t resist the candy canes in the baker’s window. I bought one dozen. Candy canes were my absolute favorite candy and a special comfort, which I justified needing on that day when I had to say *goodbye* to my home.

I touched the red and white design of the candy, thinking of my father. My father said I ate so many candy canes that I had begun to smell like one. I smiled. I believed him because even after the holiday season was over, I still ate them, buying the leftovers from the village baker with them being half the price. I had gone through my entire stash that last year, which is why I needed more, of course. I looked around again, certain I was forgetting something. My mind wandered as I walked about the rooms I was not sure I would ever see again.

I really, really did *not* want to leave. Not because I was afraid—but because I loved my home.

The sky was lit with the purple and blue magic that poured onto our land from the Ancient Lands. It had always been a beautiful sight, one that I had once enjoyed watching during the winter evenings as I waited for the chestnuts to soak and for Father and Hans to come up the path to our house.

But that had been so long ago.

I shook my head. I needed to focus; I could do it. I walked to our small table and pulled the satchel which I had prepared onto my shoulder. I went through all the items I packed in my mind, one last time.

Other than the chestnuts, I had bread, dried fruit and meat, which I’d traded some roasted chestnuts for in the village square. I also had flint, a waterproof fabric like the one my father and brother purchased before they left. They said it was a good barrier from the snow. I also had a small amount of rope, a knife, and a pan I hoped to use to melt snow for drinking water.

What else? Was I missing anything? Of course, I wished I had more coin for more supplies. Many families packed large backpacks and strapped them onto their bodies, or even pulled them on sleds behind them, but even if I wanted more, I had nothing left.

This is it.

I had been prepared for some things. Last winter before Hans left, he'd been practicing building an ice structure. We had packed snow to make small brick shapes and stacked them on top of each other into a dome shape. I was surprised that it worked. I teased him the entire time, but we slept in it to test the shelter, and it was effective.

A shovel. I needed a shovel.

I walked to the back of the cottage and looked through the gardening supplies that used to be my mother's before she passed. I had never known my mother, as she died from an illness while I was a young child. But I knew *about* her, and of her love for plants and for the chestnut fields. Father would often say I reminded him of Mother when I was soaking the chestnuts and roasting them in a pan over the fire. He would go on about how just the sight of me doing what she loved to do, brought a smile to his face. I enjoyed loving the things my mother had loved. She used to have a small garden behind our cottage, where she would grow some flowers in the warmer months. Haleston was not a warm place, and not many things grew, but from what father said, mother had found a way. She had a small wooden cart filled with supplies, and over time, they became withered and faded, covered with cobwebs inside. Father never moved her gardening supplies, and Hans and I never did either.

Walking to the cart, I knew there was a shovel on the second shelf. I was sure that once upon a time its silver metal glinted in the sunlight, but not anymore; it was tarnished and rusted a little on the handle. I bent down and saw it there. For the first time in my life, I would take something out of her cart. Father would not care; he was gone. The handle was cold in my hand, and I yanked it out, seeing a black spider scurry into a corner of the shelf. I stepped back, wiping the shovel on my gray cloak and walked back inside, placing it inside my bag. After doing a final check, I took a deep breath and walked out my door, not even bothering to lock it behind me.

I was never going to return.



There were five men and their families at the entrance to the forest. They all stood in front of the sign that marked the Iced Path. The forest groaned as if unwilling to open the path for all of us wishing to enter. I put my shoulders back. *No*, I did not wish to enter, but I had made a promise—one I wish I hadn't made—that I would enter that place and join my family on the other side.

If they ever even made it to the other side.

"*You are entering?*" one man asked with a rather scruffy brown beard and beady, black eyes.

Me?

I looked up at him with a glare and nodded. I was used to everyone always underestimating me because of my size. Sure, I was small, but I was so much more than tiny. My brother had once told me to use my size to my advantage. I found it hard to be sweet when people kept saying that I was incapable of doing things before they even knew me.

"*You are so small—*" he continued, despite my glare.

"*So what, if I'm small? What does that mean?*"

"*I didn't mean any offense. It's just—*"

"How about, you worry about yourself and leave me alone," I said, turning my back to him.

"You are a *Carol*, right? Hans Carol's sister?" someone else asked, and I turned behind me to see a familiar face. He had brown, messy hair; a crooked nose; a strong chin; and striking, bright blue eyes. It took me a moment to remember his name. It had been so long since I mingled with the people in our village. Keeping to myself was easier.

Freddy! That was it. He had been an old friend of Hans.

"I am," I said with a nod, not sure if I should smile just yet. I didn't want anyone in the competition to think I was weak.

"Do you think Hans made it?" he asked, coming to stand beside me. He wore a long, dark blue cloak that whipped between his legs as he walked. He had a warm glint in his eyes, his brown hair falling into them.

"I *hope* he and my father made it, but who knows what goes on inside."

"Yes, your father left, too. I forgot about that," he said with a nod and pursed lips.

"You are going, too?" I asked, noticing that beneath his cloak on the left side, he had a tan, leather satchel.

"I am, and my mother is not happy about it, but I have waited too long. I have always wondered about the haunted forest."

"Haven't we all? I understand. I hope your mother finds peace." I did not know if I could ever feel peace again. I had once felt it, when my father and brother were with me and when we were roasting chestnuts in the evenings. How I longed for that again.

"They could be there, your family, I mean," he said with a cough.

"Thank you, but I fear the worst—" I paused, stopping myself. I was sharing too much.

"I understand. I hope you find the answers you seek." He nodded and walked away.

No one knew exactly how the competition worked. At least, it was all so mysterious that we were unsure. There were whispers that the guardian of the forest only let one person into the enchanted village each time the frozen forest was opened to us. Meaning, Freddy and all the men would be lost in the forest forever if I won and made it to the enchanted village. I wanted to curse, but held my tongue. What a horrible, rotten thing father and Hans had gotten me into.

I looked at Freddy, who was staring into the forest. He was kind, but no friend of mine—not in that competition. I feared I gave him too much information and that he could use it to make me vulnerable. Only one of us would be able to make it to the other side.

Either way, I spoke the truth, and it was too late. I was going to do this. It was possible that I was going to win and gain entrance to the enchanted village; otherwise, I would die in the forest, but hopefully, if I met my end, there, I would not do so before discovering what happened to my father and brother.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cole



“Five, that is a good number,” Ancient Vera said, there beside me as we stood at the entrance of the haunted forest. Her long, black hair hung loose around her shoulders, trailing down like a curtain of shadows on either side of her pale face. Her bright, silver eyes were focused on the humans. Vera always wore the same shade of silver, almost blending in with the snow as the sun was just about to drop behind the mountains. There was a coolness to her tone when she spoke—just as there was in her demeanor.

“Do you think that any of these humans have a chance this year?” I asked.

“I sense greed in this group, not a promising season,” she answered, seemingly bored. Vera used to scare me, but I had learned that if I did as she asked, there were never any problems. We were there for the same cause, to protect the enchanted village from those unworthy to enter.

I could see the five men who stood there, waiting for the Iced Path to be unsealed. The colors of the Ancient’s lights shone bright in the sky, causing the white snow to look purple and blue.

As the hand struck midnight in the clock tower of the humans’ village square, the five figures stood still. Then, a small figure in gray stood beside them. A sixth. I recognized her instantly as the maiden who had glared at the forest. I could not help but smile that she was there.

“It seems a maiden is trying. She is so slight of stature. I wonder how old she is,” Vera questioned. I knew she could easily find out anything she wanted about her. Ancients could do almost anything, even search to a certain extent into others’ minds. She had said in previous years that she enjoyed the game, however, that she liked me doing the haunting, and that she did not want the surprise of who won ever spoiled.

“She is not a child, although she is small,” I heard myself saying. I wanted to go to her and scare her away, but I also wanted to haunt her within those woods until she never could leave. My thoughts conflicted with each other and made me shake my head.

“Well, small size does not always mean *failure*,” Ancient Vera said with a nod. “Unseal the forest; it is time.” With a flick of her wrist and within billowing red smoke, she was gone. Most likely, she was off to the castle, or if not there, wherever else she desired. It was my time to do what I did best—haunt those humans, test them to see if they were worthy. Although I was not supposed to be biased, I could not help but stare at the small maiden as I unsealed the forest and watched them enter.

What a brave little maiden.

I was excited to learn more about her. But only because that is how I haunted best—getting to know a little about the humans, then toying with them.

I smiled. *Let the games begin.*

CHAPTER FIVE

Gretel



The wind blew as the last chime rang out at the midnight hour. It was time.

"Enter," a voice floated on the wind, causing me to shiver. The five men beside me began to walk forward upon the Iced Path. I followed slowly after them, doing my best to forget what stepping foot into that forest meant.

The Iced Path was clearly marked, and I hoped that by following it, I was doing the right thing.

As we entered deeper, two of the men ahead of me lit lanterns. Their flickering, yellow flames were beacons through the darkness.

Blast, that would have been helpful, bringing a lantern. I inwardly scolded myself for forgetting something that could have been so helpful. One man, without a word, left the Iced Path before us, entering an unmarked part of the forest. I watched his brown cloak shift as he walked until I could no longer see him. Had he seen something we had not? No one else had left the path. I would wait and see what happened, keeping my distance behind the others. After walking for a while, hearing the swooshing of wings and other animal noises, yet no sign of any animal life, the men started mumbling about the eeriness of the woods.

It was, indeed, eerie. I expected nothing less. I had been on pins and needles, waiting and watching for something to happen. I knew there were tests for the travelers in the forest.

What are they? Will they be obvious? Or hidden? How does a person discover if their soul is worthy? I wondered.

"Hey!" I heard a man cry out and dart from the forest—the one who had left us earlier. He was screaming, holding a knife in his hands as if he meant to murder one of us.

"Stay back!" Freddy called out.

"There is evil in these forests. I want to go back—I need to go back." The man holding the blade shook, and horror filled his eyes. Freddy took the knife from him. I walked up to the others, there spread out upon the path.

"What did you see?" I asked. He turned to look at me.

“Things of nightmares.” Then he ran in the opposite direction along the Iced Path. I knew there was no hope for him. Once you entered, unless you made it across to the enchanted village, you never made it out again.

“Do not leave the path, unless you want to go mad, I guess,” Freddy said to the other three men. Then Freddy turned to look at me, although because of the darkness, I could not see his expression. “Are you all right?” he whispered, coming closer to me as the other men walked forward.

“Yes, I feel badly for him,” I said.

“Once inside, there is no going back; it’s forward only,” Freddy said.

It was true. I nodded and watched as he walked down the path again. Dozens of my fellow townspeople had never returned. I believed it, even if I hoped differently. In my lifetime, I had never seen anyone come out, which also fed into my growing despair.

Hans and father? Was there even a little hope that I would find them and that we could go home?

I had no desire to walk all evening. I needed a sharp mind when the sun rose for whatever tests I would encounter. There was a nice outcropping of trees to the left that I decided could shelter me as I rested, while keeping in sight of the pathway. As the men continued walking along the path, I left it to sit under a tree upon the waterproof fabric I had brought with me. I did not want to waste time and energy constructing a shelter, but if I did not build a shelter, or at least a fire, I might have died from the cold. I wrapped my gray cloak around me, shivering. I spotted a few larger pieces of wood that would most likely burn for a while. Getting up, I pulled them to my tree and began to construct a small fire. As I lit the fire, the warmth caused me to sigh. Maybe I would roast a few chestnuts. That would comfort me, I was sure.

“Hello, deary.”

I snapped my head to the left. There, standing a few feet away, was a figure in a black cloak.

“Hello?” I asked, making sure my voice did not quiver.

“I do not mean to upset or frighten you, deary. I only wondered if you had any food to spare an old man?” He stepped closer and into the light of the small fire. I couldn’t make out the old man’s face but saw the curve of his bent back.

Without any other thought, I stood and motioned for him to sit down within the small clearing I had made to rest for the night.

“Of course. Come rest your limbs,” I said sweetly as he sat and pulled out his very old, withered hands over the fire to warm them.

“You are kind. Do you have any food?” he rasped.

“Oh, yes, of course. I have bread and some chestnuts. My family is known for having the best roasted chestnuts in all the kingdoms.” I pulled out the bread from my satchel followed by my bag of already roasted chestnuts. I could warm them up a little by the fire for him. I had hoped to keep as much of my food as I could for my journey. I had no idea how long I would be in the forest, trying to survive.

“Oh, that looks delightful,” the old man said, taking the entire loaf of bread and inhaling it without even taking bites. So odd, I had never seen anyone eat like that. He looked so thin; he needed it more than I did. I began to prepare the roasted chestnuts for myself, deciding to only have three for dinner and save the rest, especially as my bread was gone. The old man made a pleased sigh.

“How are you here?” I asked him, wondering how long he had been trapped in the forest.

"Oh, I have been here for a very long time. Do not worry about me," he said. "You can make it through this; I have a feeling," he said with a crooked smile. Then he stood as if to leave.

"Oh, you can stay," I said, standing beside him.

"You have helped me rest these bones and have given me strength to go on. Thank you," he said with a nod. "For your kindness, I have a gift for you." He reached into his black cloak and handed me a purple bundle, wrapped with twine. "This shall protect you from the cold, for you have cared for me."

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded and walked into the dark woods. I tried to watch him, to see which direction he went, but before my eyes, he vanished.

I sat back down, holding the bundle in my arms. I untied the twine with a gasp.

It was a beautiful purple coat with small embellished details embroidered at the hem and adorned with white fur along the edges. It was sure to keep me so much warmer than my old gray cloak. With a smile, I pulled it on. Heat poured into me.

Is this magic?

I leaned against the tree, finishing my last chestnut. The buttery sweet flavor of the nut, along with the warmth of the coat, brought me peace, even in those haunted woods. I picked up my bag, which held all my supplies, and held it to my chest. The groaning of the forest and the creaking of the trees were terrifying enough to frighten me, especially once I was sitting still, but with the kindness of that old man's gift, I felt warm enough and brave enough to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Cole



I had never looked at a maiden as long as I looked upon that one. I could not help it; there was something about her that seemed to be a beacon in the night, calling me to her.

Yes, very odd, indeed.

“She is clever,” I turned to see Vera, who rarely came out during a haunting. “Did you give her the coat?” she asked.

I nodded. That maiden had passed her first test of kindness and selflessness. “She gave me all of her bread and had me sit by the fire and everything. She has a good chance at this.”

“Well, it is time to test her again,” Vera said with a sigh, as if she were incredibly bored. She was not a very pleasant person to be with. “Test her.” Ancient Vera nodded toward the maiden, and with a flick and puff of red smoke, she was gone, and I was alone, looking upon the sleeping maiden again.

I could easily manipulate my appearance to test the humans who entered the woods with the Ancient magic Vera lent to me. I had never been given food from any human before, though, and trying to eat as I sat there with her caused a strange sensation within me. I shoved the loaf into my mouth, but made it disappear before swallowing it. I did not need to eat, but I wanted it to look convincing.

The maiden’s head was turned to the side, resting upon her shoulder, and her breaths were even and warm—at least I assumed they were, as they caused the air in front of her face to appear as that foggy smoke, like the breath of all humans. She had a small splattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks, and her lips were full and open as she breathed through her mouth in her sleep. Her hair was tucked beneath her hood, but a few strands fell about her face, just enough to tell me that her hair was most likely a brown color when in the sunlight. She was on a blanket of some sort, and across her chest, she held her bag with one arm. In her sleep, she appeared so ethereal.

I do not know how long I stood there looking at her. Perhaps, it was because I needed to really think about the best way to test her again. I took my *haunting* incredibly seriously, but I knew I had been there too long when she spoke and her

voice startled me.

That was not supposed to happen.

“Who are you?” she snapped, her eyes slowly opened. I stepped back, moving away. Unless I made myself visible, humans could never *actually* see me. I made sure I was invisible, but when she opened her eyes and faced my direction I knew something was different.

She stood, staring right at me.

How?

That had never happened before. I darted behind a tree. Maybe, I was losing my touch. I could play it off; I was very good at improvising.

“Hello,” I said, walking out from behind a tree, visible on purpose and coming closer to her with a smile upon my face. She moved, her back pressed firmly against the tree.

“Go away.”

“Can’t, I live here,” I said, shrugging one shoulder.

“Right here in this spot?” she asked.

“The entire forest is my home, actually,” I said, raising my arms and turning around slightly to motion to everything around us.

“Who are you?” she asked as I moved even closer to her, dropping my arms.

When I reached her, I tugged on her bag—I could touch *objects*, just not people, which was how I pretended to eat the bread.

She glared at me, pulling it closer to her chest.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, and I could not help but smile at the aggressiveness in her tone and body.

What a small, little person she is, portraying such strong emotions. It was incredibly cute. I do not think I had ever used or thought of that word, *cute*, before. She reminded me of one of those small sparrows which lived deep within the woods and inhabited a specific grove of trees. They were always squawking, but they were so tiny that I was certain no one could ever be intimidated by them.

“Inspecting what you brought for your journey. I’m rather curious,” I said, leaning in to look into her bag.

Before I could get a good look, she pulled out the smallest shovel I had ever seen and hit me over the head with it. I had never been hit before—no human could harm me, even with an object. Still, I was so startled. Instead of reacting as a human would, I stood there, frozen, with my eyes meeting hers, and I slowly pulled my lips into an impish smile. There *was* something different about her.

“It will take more than that to kill me, little mouse,” I said with a wink.

She is going to be such fun.

“Excuse me? Do not wink at me or call me a ‘little mouse’!” She held back her arm holding the shovel, and I stepped back. While I knew she could not hurt me, I had no desire to be hit with her tiny shovel again.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“None of your business!” she shouted while holding the shovel out, pointing right at me as if it were a sword.

“I think it is my business when a maiden all of a sudden is in my home.”

“No.”

“No, what?”

“No to you, to this conversation, all of it—no!” she shouted, waving the shovel around. She then quickly turned and walked away, angrily, into another outcropping of trees.

I made myself appear in front of her. She could not escape me. Not unless I wished her to; I was haunting her. That was my job, and one I did rather well. I was ready for her to walk through me as all humans did.

She gasped, running into my chest at my sudden appearance.

She ran into me.

Her body hit my body.

Impossible.

Warmth flooded through me, and I reached out an arm to touch her—to steady myself, and her. Her arm was solid—she was so warm.

When have I ever felt warmth? I wondered.

She also smelled like something—something sweet and incredibly alluring.

When have I ever smelled something? I must have been able to smell things in the past, right? Why can I not remember?

“Let go of me!” she shouted. I realized, then, that both of my arms were wrapped around her; I could not get enough of her warmth. Not wanting her to know I was surprised by our contact, I pulled her in closer. Her warmth was intoxicating as was that smell, which seemed so familiar, but I could not place it.

“For a little mouse, you are rather aggressive.”

“You are rude,” she said, huffing. “Stop hugging me! You are cold, and you cannot just *hug* a person!”

As I moved my hands from around her, she took a swing at me with the shovel, but I moved faster and pinned her arms to her sides with my own, making her drop the shovel in the snow. I seemed to know how to block attacks—*interesting*. I moved my face down, my nose against her neck, and she froze. I inhaled, wanting to know what on all of Terra that delicious smell was.

Delicious? When have I ever thought something smelled delicious? I do not eat.

The entire experience with that captivating maiden was going to be my undoing. I was not behaving much like the guardian I needed to be.

“You feel warm,” I said.

She just looked at me, expressionless. “What are you doing?” she asked, no longer trying to pull away. She only heaved as if in exasperation.

“Smelling you,” I said with a chuckle, and then I let her go. She sputtered and glared at me.

“Why? Why are you here, pestering me and *smelling* me? Is this a test?” She paused. “You need to learn about something called *personal boundaries*. You cannot just grab people!”

“If it was a test, you would have lost. I have not had physical contact with humans in—a while,” I said, unsure what to say to explain my odd behavior. I turned my back to her, walking over to where she had been sitting originally. Her fire was almost out. I waited a few seconds, knowing she would follow.

“Who are you?” she asked again as I leaned against a nearby tree.

“It doesn’t matter who I am. But you should rest. The real tests begin soon, and I worry about your—” I paused, thinking about the best word to describe this maiden. “your—*passionate* nature. It could hurt you.”

“Passionate nature”? What does that even—”

“Good night,” I said, turning around to face the Iced Path. I needed to leave before I *really* crossed a line with that interesting maiden.

“Wait!” she called, and I paused, then turned to face her.

“Yes?”

“My name is Gretel. What is your name?”

My jaw dropped, but I quickly closed it.

“My, well, that's a tragedy,” I said, shaking my head.

“What is a tragedy?”

“Gretel? Really? *That* is your name?”

“Yes, it is a very respectable and strong female name,” she said, turning her nose up at me. She still looked only as intimidating as an insect—or a tiny mouse.

“Is it, little mouse?” I asked with a smile, turning my head to the side in a question. I did not feel like Gretel was a name suited for such a maiden. But what did I know? Nothing. I hadn't even known I could feel warmth and smell things, let alone touch that maiden, the only human I had ever touched in—how long? Too many things were unknown to me. I needed to leave that maiden and complete some other hauntings, as I should.

“Go away. Don't you dare call me ‘*little mouse*’ ever again,” she said with a huff, taking a seat near her fire.

“I'll think of something else,” I whispered with a smile.



The men had made camp for the night, and they were scattered about different parts of the forest. They were spaced out further than usual. During past competitions, some humans went mad, and they even attacked each other. Those people were dealt with quickly; there was no room in the enchanted village for anyone who would lay their hands on another person.

I moved about the encampments, making scratching sounds until one human stirred. To do my job correctly, I needed to keep the fear level as high as possible. Vera told me that when humans were afraid, they did the vilest things, and from what I had observed, that was true.

“Who is there?” I heard the sleepy man say from within his tent. I went from tent to tent until all the humans had awakened and were moving about.

I knew that if I could lead a few of them into the woods, I could then test them, individually, and that was the best way to go about my hauntings.

One by one, I guided the men into different parts of the forest. One of the men I coaxed over to a small pond, and another to a ditch, where I knew he would be trapped for some time. I smiled at the thought of him pacing back and forth, trapped. Another man, who I caused to walk around in circles, ended up in a heap upon the snow.

My work was tiresome, although I did have magic at my disposal, which was enjoyable. My work required more mental than physical energy.

As the light began to rise into the sky, I found myself back where I had left Gretel. I could see the slight indentation in the snow, marking where she had been; only, she was not there. I walked around the pile of ashes and partially burnt wood from her fire, wondering how it could be possible for me not to know where she had gone; I knew where everyone was when they were within my forest.

Something inside of me didn't like that. My whole being began to feel unsteady. I walked slowly back onto the Iced Path, thinking that if I had been her, I would stay as near to it as possible. As I moved down the path, I finally found her. My chest became light as I took in a breath upon seeing her lavender coat about her in the distance. I knew that color would suit her—it reminded me of the Ancients' purple magic hues in the sky with the white and light blue tones. I shook my head to focus.

She was walking about the abandoned camp of one of her competitors, calling out to them. But I knew that they were too far away to hear her. I moved closer to her, wanting to see what color her eyes were in the light of day. I made absolutely sure that I was invisible as I got closer; I saw that her eyes were a deep brown—very pretty.

“Who is there?” she asked, looking around, but not in my exact direction. Good at least for the moment I was invisible to her.

Why did it not work last night?

Curious.

I hid behind a nearby tree, just in case something was wrong with my *guardian of the forest* magic.

“Where are you? Are the men okay?” she asked, looking around the path again.

“Why?” I asked, watching the wind as I made it caress her cheek with my words.

“Because I saw one man who appeared mad, running back to the entrance. Did these other men do the same? Are they all right?”

She cared about those men who could potentially take *her* spot in the enchanted village.

She was pure of heart. I smiled. She had passed another test.

“You care—that is good, little sparrow,” I said. I wasn’t sure what it was that made me say that, but it seemed more fitting. She was, indeed, not a little mouse. Mice were too gentle.

“Sparrow? Really? And where are you? Show yourself,” she called out.

“You said you did not like ‘little mouse,’” I said, curling my words into the air toward her. I thought of the sparrows in the deeper parts of the forest.

Yes, sparrow, that is a good name for her. Much better than Gretel.

She held her position for a while, so I was able to sneak up behind her.

“You remind me more of a sparrow. Small, yet with a distinct voice, and full of rather lively movements,” I said with a chuckle, behind her, making her turn. I knew I still held my invisible form, for her eyes darted around and did not meet mine. The sparrows I watched were also incredibly cute, just like that maiden there before me.

“My name is *Gretel*,” she said, stomping her foot in the snow. “And why would I not care? Those are innocent men.”

“They chose to be tested,” I said, moving further away from her, over to a different tree. I did not trust my abilities with her for too long out in the open. She made me vulnerable; I had never experienced that before.

“Will you tell me who you are? And your name?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter who I am, as I told you before—” There was a shout and a cry, and I saw her turn toward the sound and then run toward it. Running toward danger? She was either incredibly foolish or quite brave.

I followed as I was supposed to, keeping a watch on the competitors, shifting between the trees.

She reached one of the younger men who had become nearly frozen solid after one of my tests.

“Freddy!” she called out, then touched his hand, pulling back with a sharp intake of breath.

“He has failed,” I called out in the wind.

“What will happen to him?” she asked. She began taking off her coat and pulling it around his already frozen shoulders. *As if such a thing would help him.*

“Frozen forever,” I said.

“No! Please, let me help him.”

"No!" I called back, shaking the ground, causing her to stumble. I did not usually feel that way. Was it anger?

Why does she care for this human who is so greedy? I wondered.

I did not like it.

"Please, I know him."

"He chose to enter the forest, and he failed. Look to the bottom of the frozen pond to see what he thought was more important than his life."

She walked over to the pond, leaned over, and gasped.

"Gold?" she whispered. "No—he was good," she said, walking back to the frozen man. "He had to have a worthy reason for trying to reach it. His family needed it, I am sure—"

"Not good enough," I said.

She shivered, and I wondered why she did not put her coat back on herself. That frozen man had no need of it, but she did. I blew a cold breeze toward her, hoping she would move faster and place the coat around herself again, but she just stood there, looking into the man's cold, frozen eyes.

Humans had a great capacity for love. Ancient Vera always expressed it as the only good, or redeeming, thing about them.

Does this maiden love this human man?

For some reason, that idea bothered me. Most likely because he was unworthy, and she had already proven that she was worthy, at least so far. She had a temper problem, and there were many more tests she would have to face. But having compassion and selflessness were two tests she had already passed, and the first full day had hardly even begun.

That was promising for her, although not so for me. If she passed all the tests, she would leave the forest. I would never see her again.

I did not like that. *That is a problem, but I will ignore it,* I thought.

I blew another breeze or two at her until she shook her head and pulled her coat from around the frozen human man.

"I am so sorry, Freddy. If I discover some way to save you, I will do it," she whispered. "I think this is horrible," she said, looking around the forest, trying to spot me.

Is she chastising me? Why does that make me smile?

She held her hands on her hips and pouted her lip. "This cannot be what's right!"

"It is horrible that he was so greedy, that he chose to freeze himself, and then he gave you such pain," I said.

"Blast this foolish test!" she shouted.

"Quiet, little sparrow—"

"Don't—"

I walked closer to her, finally appearing.

She jumped back, holding her breath.

"Hello, little dove," I smiled, and her glare became more intense the closer I got to her. I liked *little sparrow* the best, but I would keep testing names out to see her reaction. I was supposed to haunt her—*annoying her is haunting in a way, isn't it?*

"Don't," she warned.

"Don't what?" I asked her innocently, as if I didn't know.

"Don't call me *things!*" She seemed really flustered, like a—

"Too late, my little peacock. Settle down your tail feathers," I said with a laugh, and she shoved past me—her touch, again, was so warm, even with a harsh shove.

"I. Am. Not. 'Little.' Nor. Am. I. A. Bird!"

“Okay, *little squirrel*,” I said as she began walking back toward the path, mumbling many things under her breath, all of which I chose to ignore. I followed directly behind her. Pestering her was the most fun I could ever remember having. I should annoy humans more often. Although, I doubted they would have as satisfying reactions as did Gretel.

But I did need to focus on my task, not just getting her reaction.

“Please, just tell me—who are you?” she snapped as she stepped back onto the path, whipping around to look directly at me. Her hood fell from her head, and her light brown hair spilled out, some of it a bit golden in the light of day.

It wasn’t my fault. I was taken off guard a bit at the sight. I’d never seen hair like that, and it was *normal* to need a minute. We did not usually have maidens enter the forest.

That is all this is.

“Hello?” she said, waving a hand in front of my face.

I was not sure that I could actually breathe, but if I did have breath, I would have been struck breathless then, and I would have forgotten everything about *everything* while gazing upon her.

“Hello!?” she asked again but with more irritation, only making her appear more adorable.

“What?” I asked, clearing my throat and turning to look behind her at a tree.

“Are you frozen here like Freddy, and is it your soul that haunts this place?” she asked, the anger draining from her as she spoke. I saw compassion in her question.

“No. I am the guardian of the forest,” I said, making the trees and ground shake a little.

“Yes, but *who* are you? Where did you come from, and how did you become ‘the guardian’?”

I paused, taking in her words, her question. I had never wondered about such things before. As far as I knew, I had always been there in those woods, doing the Ancients’ bidding, finding souls worthy enough to enter the enchanted village.

“Hello?” she called out to me, once again, and I was still unsure what to say.

“I told you who I am. Wish I could keep arguing with you, but I have to go, little *beetle*.”

As I heard her grunt and curse at my new name for her, I disappeared, laughing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gretel



“**H**ello?” I asked again for the fourth time with no reply as I pulled one small candy cane from my pocket, broke off a piece, and placed it in my mouth.

Perhaps, the forest’s guardian had left. I was going to go mad if I had to keep interacting with him. That was probably his plan. And while, yes, I was irritated, I would not let him win. I tried to forget about the ridiculous names he had for me. It was entirely possible that I was overreacting, but I did not want to think about that, yet the forest was so silent that I found myself unable to stop worrying. It was unsettling being there, and at least, when that annoying, impish man was there with me, I did not have to fear the silence, and his pestering distracted me from imagining what unknown horrors lurked in that forest.

I walked back to the Iced Path with a heavy heart after seeing the failure of the only person I knew in the competition. Freddy, although it was possible that he was lost in a bout of greed (I was still unsure of his reasons, which mattered in my opinion), he was not a bad man.

Continuing to walk, I noticed to my left that there was a trail of something in the snow, a trail, clearly, purposefully made as if someone had walked through there in the past, leaving items behind them as they walked. *Could this be?* Excitement rushed through me. *Could this trail be from Father or Hans?* I saw what was there—chestnut shells, husks, and even some whole chestnuts, all stuck in place, frozen there in the snow. One by one, I struggled to pull out the frozen pieces as I followed the path they made. I inspected the items carefully, and I smiled. When my father and Hans were out harvesting the nuts, they would often separate from each other, but they always left small trails of nut fragments to find each other again. They joked that the chestnuts were too good, even raw, so they had to eat a few as they worked.

I smiled at the memory. When they came home from a long day of harvesting and eating the raw chestnuts, they always complained of their stomachs hurting. I often scolded them, explaining that they should be patient and wait until the nuts were roasted. Everyone knew that eating too many raw chestnuts upset one’s stomach. But Father always said that a “true lover of chestnuts ate them raw.” Luckily, their

stomachs only ached for a few hours, the same as if they had eaten too much candy.

I laughed to myself. I had never eaten many chestnuts raw, as I loved them roasted and had no desire like my father and Hans to prove how much they loved chestnuts, but I did mark paths using the husks and papery shells, or skins, as some called them. Hans and I even made up a game, trying to mark paths in the forest to see who could correctly follow a trail, leading to a secret destination or to a treat of some kind.

I dearly missed my family. My heart ached.

No, I can not focus on this sadness; this is progress! I thought.

As I picked up a fully intact, frozen, and roasted chestnut, I squealed a little, clutching it to my chest. It had the Carol “X” scored into it; my heart felt light—we always made an X on our chestnuts. Others, who harvested their own chestnuts, scored them with a line down the middle, or some other symbol. I held the nut in my hands as tightly as I could to unfreeze it as I continued to walk, following the path. Becoming impatient, I stopped, cracked the outer shell and broke through the burr; then, I peeled the shells off, popping the still rather frozen chestnuts into my mouth. They were frozen, but as I bit into them just a little, I was overcome with the flavor. It was sweet and buttery—with that special note of deliciousness that made our chestnuts stand out from all the rest. It was a Carol family chestnut; there was no doubt.

“Hans!” I shouted in a rush, picking up shells, piece after piece, through the forest. Hans had been there! He had to have been there! I smiled. My hands were becoming full of the shells, burrs, skins, and nuts, so I left them in a pile under a tree, and then I continued.

Perhaps, it had not been a good idea to leave the Iced Path, but that trail was a sign; it had to be from my brother, or even my father. Hope pulsed through me, and I could not let it die.

So I continued through the frozen forest, I noticed that the trees became sparse until there was a clearing right in front of me. The shell and chestnut trail went off in a different direction, away from the clearing, but what was in the center of the clearing pulled my attention to it. There in the clearing was a small cottage. I moved toward it, dropping shells, making my own trail as I went. When I grew near, I noticed that the walls were made out of glass, and I could see inside. All sorts of plants and flowers bloomed within it. Such a bright and colorful contrast to the rather stark, white forest surrounding it. How could plants live in such a harsh climate? I had no idea. I had always wanted to be a gardener. I wondered if there was a master gardener of some sort who lived within those walls. There was movement inside, and I walked over to the door almost in a daze. I didn't even remember walking toward it. But I was there, so *I might as well say “hello,”* I thought.

I knocked, noticing that I could still see my trail of chestnut shells and burrs, even from the small, glass cottage. “Oh, dear! You must be so cold, come inside,” what appeared to be an old woman, with green skin, curly vine-like hair, and bright blue eyes that looked like small flowers with black centers. She appeared more plant-like, herself, than person-like, but perhaps, she was a magical being, I did not wish to be rude. I thanked her and entered, immediately warmed. The air was thick with a wet heat I had never experienced before.

“What brings you here, Gretel?” the old woman asked.

“Oh, you know my name?”

“Yes, of course, so why are you here?”

“Oh, um, I am searching for my brother and father—”

"Ah, and for the enchanted village, yes?"

"I would be happy to find it, but I want to know what happened to my family—"
I paused, feeling a weight on my chest that ached.

"Well, I understand that pain all too well. Loss can be so painful. How you must hurt and ache. Such an acute pain must burn," she said, and as she said it, I noticed that all her words were actualized within me; she was so right. "I am sure it pierces, too," she said, and I clutched my chest as I noticed a piercing there. "I have some leafy greens here that could take away your pain."

"Take the pain away?" I asked in confusion, still feeling the pains pulsing through me.

"Clear your mind to focus on your goal," she said softly as she handed me a handful of leaves. They

smelled incredible, almost like candy with a slight floral aroma to them, which made me pause.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Well, they are leaves, dear, but they taste like sweets," she said with a wink. The heat from her cottage made my head get a bit fuzzy.

"Oh," I said in a daze. I looked at the plant lady who seemed to move closer to me. Her hand, more green tangled vines, than a fleshy human hand, was on my very human hand. She moved me closer.

"I am hungry," I said faintly.

"Ah, just one little bite, and you will have no more pain. You can stay here with me—help me with my plants," she said, and I looked from her flowery eyes to the plants around her glass cottage. I gasped then, noticing that her plants were shaped like—

People.

Some looked just to be standing normally, others looked to be raising their hands in defense, and one looked as if it even had a mouth open in a scream. They must have been trimmed to form those shapes. How eerie that topiary was, however.

"Oh, Gretel! You offend me; here I am offering you a gift, and you would refuse it?"

"I am sorry. I have no intention of offending." I placed the leaves she had shoved into my hand on a nearby table and moved backward.

That was when the old plant woman's face changed. Her teeth grew sharp like thorns, and her blue eyes swirled, like a flower spinning in a breeze. It was so unnerving—terrifyingly wild. The people-shaped bushes all around us shook and moaned as if they were not plants, but people—people trapped inside of them.

"Eat!" she squealed, and I covered my ears, turned, and ran from the cottage. As the ice-cold air hit me, I began to understand where I was. Had I forgotten?

I was in the haunted forest, and that had to be another test. I panted as I ran, following the trail I had left behind me, looking down as I fled, which I realized was an incredibly foolish idea when I ran into something. It was not hard, like a tree; it was soft—yet cold. I froze, lifting a hand out, looking before me.

There was nothing there, and yet I felt something there, almost like a person. An invisible person?

The Guardian.

"Can you see me? I think I have it figured out," he said, then paused.

I was still unable to speak as I was panting.

"Do you feel me but not see me, little cricket?" the guardian asked with a laugh.

Those names were already old.

Finally catching my breath, I grunted. “No matter what I do, I cannot get rid of you, can I?” I asked, trying to push myself away from him. It was rather strange to be held by someone when they were invisible. My entire body was leaning into his, and I was looking right at the ground of snow—tilted toward it, yet not falling.

“I see you met the plants.”

“There was a person in there!”

“No, she’s not *exactly* a person, more *plant* really. Truthfully, I believe she was spelled from a few plants. I do not believe that the Ancients realized that their human plant lady was making humans into topiaries. But they left her there, as a test; it’s a good test, I think. One that you passed. Never really liked it too much myself, a little—”

“Horrifying!” I shouted.

“Did you notice her *thorn* teeth? Very detailed spell,” the guardian went on.

“It—she—it was awful.”

“Only for those who eat her leaves; then they are hers forever. But you resisted, even though she promised to take away your pains and heartache.”

“My pains and heartache are mine. I do not wish them gone. They make me who I am, stronger and wiser and brave.”

“Well said, little sparrow.”

I glared at the direction of his voice.

“So those really are real people who are stuck there as plants? Not her, but the others?”

“Yes, like I said before about your frozen greedy friend, they failed. It’s what happens here.”

“How can the Ancients be allowing this?”

“They are making sure that only the worthy are allowed into the enchanted village. The enchanted village can only house the best of humans in order to keep guard over the tomb of the traitor, King Falcon. ‘May he rot in the mountain.’”

“May he rot in the mountain.”

In a flicker, the guardian was visible. His wavy black hair and piercing blue gaze held me there. He was looking down at me.

“It is imperative, little sparrow, that no one lets that monster out of his mountainous prison.”

“I do understand that, believe me; however, these people may not be your, and the Ancients’, idea of *worthy for the village*, but they are worthy of *life*—to live happy lives *beyond* this forest. Yes, maybe they are not pure enough to enter the enchanted village, but why keep them imprisoned here if they are not guilty of anything other than trying?” I said in defeat.

“I do not know all the reasons why the Ancients keep them here. I see your reasoning, though, and while I am this forest’s guardian, I am bound to the rules set by the Ancients. When someone is promised a great reward, like living in the enchanted village, it attracts more corrupt hearts than good ones.”

“But surely they are okay enough to live in the kingdoms of Terra.”

“It is good that you care, cricket, but—”

“Stop,” I said, shoving his chest and removing myself from his cold embrace. “Do not call me that. Also, how do you not know that you are not, also, a prisoner here? Perhaps, you ventured here and did not make it out and are now stuck being a guardian.”

“I am not,” he said, clenching his fists. I hadn’t seen him upset before that moment, but it seemed that my comment made him mad.

“I can tell you are upset—” I said, pointing to his fisted hands. “Am I right? Are you stuck here, too?”

He flexed his hands, then put them beneath his black cloak.

“You should not worry about me, but worry about yourself. The next tests ahead are difficult, and if you become entrapped, well, no one will ever see you again. But me—I shall always see you.” He winked.

“I am not afraid. Well, I’m only afraid to have to deal with you longer than I must, but I will pass the next tests, whatever they are.”

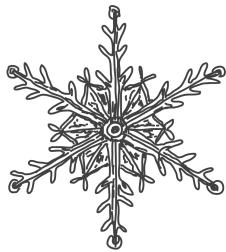
“Well then, I wish you luck.” He finally released me, and I righted myself upon the snow. He turned away as if to leave, but I was desperate for his name—anything but calling him *guardian* in my head.

“If you are not stuck here as I am, then tell me your name,” I called. “You must have one!”

“My name is Cole,” he said without turning around, and then he disappeared.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cole



I had been all over that forest, but for some reason, instead of checking in with the other humans—spending hours learning about them in order to haunt them—I was doing the bare necessities, then leaving. The usual satisfaction I got from weeding out the good humans from the bad was not there for me. After haunting two of the humans still wandering in the woods, I found myself slowly weaving in and out of the trees. Thoughts I never remembered having before flitted in and out of my brain. I needed to find something—but I did not know exactly what I was looking for, but *I will know it when I see it*. I felt a strong desire to find this unknown thing. When I'd spoken with Gretel, something she said—about me being stuck here—struck something within me. Was that why I knew nothing about my past?

Who was I before I was a guardian? Was there a *before*? While I had never attempted to leave that forest, I wondered if I even could if I desired to leave.

My mind buzzed with questions, as if I had long been asleep and meeting that maiden had brought me back to partial consciousness. I had too many questions, and my thoughts wouldn't let me work, so I traveled to all the locations within the forest where humans had been encased in enchantments and in snow. I observed them; I studied them.

When the night fell across the forest, I made my way back to the castle where I resided. I walked slowly, not ready to talk with Vera and answer whatever questions she had for me. Upon arriving, I looked at the dark, gray castle, and for a moment, I was struck with something.

My eyes fell upon the topmost turret; there was a steeple there at the very top, and in my mind, a memory flashed in front of my vision, causing me to pause in the snow.

There had once been a white flag there.

I then re-lived some long forgotten memory.

I was smiling, looking at the castle, and my eyes were bright and my soul was happy. I brushed the sweat off of my brow as I led a white horse to the side of the castle. The forest floor was nearly bare of snow, but it was wet with green life upon

it.

That was it. After the memory left me, I found myself hunched over in the snow panting. I walked quickly to the back side of the castle, realizing I had never gone back there before—that I could recall, anyway. But obviously, that was not saying much at that moment. There, I found the essence of old buildings that had fallen apart, old rockwork crumbling and in disrepair, but there, and somehow I knew it—I knew those ruins were the remnants of old stables.

Everything appeared so different in that memory. As I stood there, everything was clouded in magic, but in my memory, the sun shone bright, and it made my face warm—warm enough to sweat. As far as I could recall, while being the guardian of the forest, I had never sweat—or felt such heat.

I slowly made my way back to the front of the castle, thinking about what all of that might mean. *Does it mean anything at all?* All it confirmed was that I had been there in a past I had forgotten. But I was still there. I had lived in this old castle for as far back as my memory went. I figured it was just an old Haleston castle, no longer used, and a perfect place for Vera to keep guard over the enchanted village with me as her main aid. I walked up the broken stone steps with a new feeling—looking around at the hinges of the door, the old wooden door with a crack at the top.

Walking into the large expansive front entryway of the castle, I noticed the crooked and dusty chandelier, which I had never paid much attention to, hanging above me as I stepped foot into the once grand foyer. There before me, were the two spiral staircases I had used daily, but was only then truly *seeing* them. They must have looked very different once upon a time. However, with age and no maintenance, the staircases were gray and dirty, partially covered by dark and stained carpets, running up them. I closed my eyes, and it was as if I could see—or imagine—what it must have looked like when it had been a home to humans—Haleston royals, I had always assumed.

Or maybe it was my home at one point, a long time ago?

The chandelier used to gleam in the low light, the carpet up the staircase was once red and in stunning contrast against the white, marble steps.

I opened my eyes again and peered out over a very different view before me—not what I had seen in my mind. *How can I know these things?* How could I have gone so long living in that castle, but not really *seeing* it. I walked quickly up the staircase, not wanting to dwell on anything else that evening. No more strange memories—or things I just seemed to know which made no sense, and I needed to come to terms with something else which appeared so clear before me that I felt like a fool—It seemed that I had once been a human.

CHAPTER NINE

Gretel



I heard the noise before I saw the sight: the sound of merriment. It pierced through the winter cold. In that dark and dangerous forest, hearing laughter, music, and joy was so beautiful—and comfortably familiar.

The crunching of my boots in the snow, was in time to the beat of the music. There was an exuberance in my step as I made my way to see the joyous town before me. Only two dozen or so small homes and shops were nicely laid out, making a pleasant circle in what must have once been a clearing. The lively scene before me illuminated even the darkening afternoon, with its warmth, beckoning me even more so to enter into its light even when the unnatural glow made it appear dream-like. I walked on, drawing closer, noticing that the buildings appeared to be created from both light and dark brown sugar cookie and gingerbread. There was also an array of brightly colored candy that dotted the edges of the streets and windows. Of course, most likely, it was only made to appear that way, but it was incredibly charming, and I could not contain inside of me how deeply I wanted to explore it, forcing me to break my stride in time to the music and quicken my steps.

They were celebrating the Ancients' lights with a festival, a long standing Haleston tradition. There was greenery on the shops' windows and adorning the small cottages. There was even a large decorated tree at the center of the merriment. There were small fire pits at different locations to keep the people warm. I watched as the residents crowded around them, sipping hot drinks with smiles of joy. Even their clothing was festive for the winter season—deep greens and reds with colorful ribbons in the hair of all the maidens, and colorful handkerchiefs sticking out from men's coat pockets. I could not help but smile. I wanted to join in. *Is this a test? How could it be a test?* Still, I wanted to think it through before I went into that place to join in the celebration.

I felt my mouth water as I saw a few people holding and licking candy canes and lollipops in all the colors of the rainbow, and cookies iced to perfection.

What a perfect place to celebrate the holiday. The Ancients' lights brought happiness and warmth to people in the middle of the coldest time of the year. Well-behaved children hoped to be lucky enough to have an Ancient put some special

gifts inside their stockings, which hung beside the fire. I remembered Hans and I knitting larger than normal stockings, just in time for the last Ancient magic night in hopes that the gifts left inside would be larger. The gifts were always some fruits in the toe of the stocking along with a few pieces of peppermint candy, which was my favorite, and one small wooden toy or other trinket. I had such fond memories of sitting on the rug in our small cottage, right near the fireplace as we dumped out our stockings while Father roasted chestnuts and made peppermint tea for breakfast. I felt my eyes grow wet and quickly wiped at them. As far as I knew, we were the only kingdom in the lands that celebrated that holiday, a holiday created to bring light during the bleakest time of the year, even for Haleston. Proudly, it had not been lost and was something Haleston had kept alive even during the Great War, though greatly modified back then when they stopped honoring the Ancients, all the way through to the present day when the true holiday had been revived a few hundreds of years earlier. The traitor, King Falcon—*may he rot in the mountain*—had not taken away the spirit of our holiday. And once he was imprisoned, he could no longer keep our people away from the possibility of regaining that once broken connection to the Ancients, one we were still working to repair.

I shook my head. I needed to save my ponderings for a later time, for I didn't need to get lost within my own head as I had when meeting 'Madame Spelled Plant' in her glass cottage.

"I do not remember ever going to an Ancient Light Festival before," the voice of Cole, the guardian, came from behind me. I held my breath, waiting, annoyed with myself for the lightness in my heart, and for the happiness that swept over me, at his being there. He was the guardian of the forest, and I was pretty sure it was his job to make sure I did not reach the other side of the forest where sat the enchanted village.

Seeing him in the light of day as he held me after the Madame Spelled Plant encounter had shook me up a bit. His dark brown hair, his piercing blue eyes—they made me look far too long at him. He may have been rather irritating, but he was incredibly striking. Curse him for being so handsome. He came from behind to stand next to me. It took everything inside of me *not* to look at him.

"You said all you have ever been is a guardian, so of course not. Humans of Haleston have this holiday."

"I believe that I once was human," he said softly, surprising me with his sincerity. I looked at him; he still looked intently at me.

"Truly?"

"I believe so. A memory came to me, and only if I was a human could I have had that memory. Nothing else makes sense. I will say, I never even wondered about such things before you."

"It is good to ask questions."

"I did not ask questions—"

"So, you are stuck here, just like all of us?"

"No, of course not. Like I said, I am in control of this forest."

"Are you? Or is that the position the Ancient you serve *said* was yours when, in fact, you are being controlled?"

He looked at me for a long while; was he taking in what I said? Was he stuck there just like I was? My feelings of thinking of him as an enemy were changing. If he was like me, stuck here, we could work together; he would know far more about the tests and the forest than I did.

"I have never met anyone like you, little firefly," he whispered, dipping his head closer to mine.

I gasped and moved away.

“What?” he asked with a chuckle.

“What are you doing?”

“Smelling you,” he said, as if it were a completely normal thing to do.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“You smell sweet.”

“I like candy,” I said, pulling a small piece of candy cane, and popping it into my mouth.

Cole just watched my mouth, and I noticed that he licked his lips.

“Uh, do you want some?”

He looked at my eyes and smiled.

“I don’t eat, sparrow, but thank you—” His grin was growing impish again, in that way which indicated that I amused him.

I looked back at the small town, trying to distract myself from Cole, who made me—what did he make me? Well, *annoyed* was one word—then there was *flustered*? Yes, he made me flustered.

“Would you like to go?” he said, pointing to the candy village.

“This is a test, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

“I do not trust you, Cole.”

“Oh,” he said with another impish grin that, because of the look in his eyes, changed from playful to—to something closer to alluring. “I do like it when you say my name, little sparrow.” His voice was so low that it was rather rumbley and made my stomach feel as if there were butterflies flying around in there.

“Then maybe I should call you, ‘guardian,’ ” I said with a glare, not wishing to please him.

“That would be unfortunate,” he said, reaching out to me, touching my hair which had come out of my hood. To my surprise, I did not move away, and I let him touch the strand of hair and tuck it behind my ear. I held my breath.

“You like me, admit it,” he said with a satisfied look.

“Like you! You are the worst, and, not to mention, the *enemy*, ” I said, shoving his chest.

“Then, why do you hold your breath when I touch you—or have that look in your eyes? You find me handsome, do you not?”

He seemed overly satisfied by something, and I dearly wanted to remove that look from his face.

“You are far too full of yourself. How about you take *yourself* to the candy village festival this evening? I am in a haunted forest and have a contest to win,” I said, crossing my arms. There had to be another test in that village. Could I avoid it? Or did I have to go through it before I was allowed to have another test? There were no rules given to us contestants; we had to figure it out as we went.

“Come, how about I promise to keep you safe. If you do not eat anything, you shall be fine.”

“How could you promise that? You’ll probably take any opportunity to corrupt me or get me to fall into some hole and die.”

“Is that a real fear of yours, falling into a hole?” he asked.

“No—”

“I will save you from falling, little sparrow—”

“If you say something about me falling for you, you better stop it. I swear, Cole, you will be the death of me,” I groaned.

"I have no desire to kill you. You are more fun to pester when alive," he chuckled.

"Go away. Seriously, you are ruining this for me. I missed my village's festival this year, and I have no idea if I will ever see these things again." My bottom lip trembled, and I hated myself for giving that away. Perhaps, he did not notice.

He touched my lip with his cold finger, tilting my chin up to look at him with a small smile.

Great, he noticed.

"Well, you could experience this—with me. I have never experienced such a festival."

"I find that hard to believe. This is here," I said, motioning to the village.

"I avoid this place, as I am not needed here. It runs itself rather well. But I would venture inside to experience a piece of your world with you. It could be enjoyable, even if just for a *spell*."

"Is it enjoyable when I can threaten you with my shovel? For that is all I will do, for the entire evening. I never met a person who liked to be threatened so much."

"I do enjoy your threats with the shovel. I am sad not to see your peculiar weapon, now."

"I could pull it out, but knowing you like me to threaten you with it, I shall never do so again." I glared at him.

"When you hit me with that shovel, there was such passion in your eyes, not to mention you were so close, and, dare I say that in those brown eyes, there was a small sliver of regret, regret that you'd hurt me. Having you care for me—my, that was wonderful."

"I did *not* care for you; I was trying to hurt you. You do understand that those are two very different things, right?" I asked in irritation.

"Were you, though? I think we both know you are too kind to hurt someone."

"You—you are—" I could not find the right words.

"It is okay, little sparrow. I know I make it hard for you to think straight, to breathe, and to talk in full sentences. I am so alluring."

I pulled out my shovel again and poked him in the chest. "You are so annoying!" I shouted.

"I am sorry I took your breath away; I assure you, it is not on purpose. I, however, cannot say I will never do it again, though—"

"You do not take away my breath! It is cold and hard to breathe at times, and sometimes, you pop in and out so often that it surprises me."

"Whatever you want to call it, but I know the truth. You *desire* me, sparrow." His proud, cocky smile made my blood boil.

"I just told you the truth!"

"You like me. Maybe you are getting a little obsessed with me. That's alright with me."

"GO away!" I shouted.

"The sun is setting soon," he said, leaning closer to me and looking at my mouth.

As if I would ever kiss him!

"Don't you dare kiss me, Cole."

"You wound me, sparrow!" he shouted, holding a hand to his heart. "But I am not deterred. Your words say one thing—" He moved closer to me, caressing my cheek, and to my shame, I did not move away but moved closer as he leaned in to whisper into my ear, and I was beginning to turn a bit into some *liquid* within his arms, unable to think clearly. I held my breath. "—But your body, little sparrow, tells me another."

His cool breath caressed my ear, sending shivers through me. I turned to look at him, maybe to shout at him again, or shove him, but he was gone.

CHAPTER TEN

Gretel



After Cole left, I proceeded again, through the snow to the entrance of the small candy village. As I reached the edge of the village, right before the entrance, the merriment grew louder, as did my excitement that matched my own memories from all the festivals I had attended in the past.

I took one step onto the strange cookie paved street and everything that had once seemed fuzzy came into focus. The sudden assortment of sugary sweets' smells and a hint of pine assaulted my nose. I spun around in place, noticing that as I moved, the spongy-like street did in fact seem to be made from something softer than the typical packed dirt and rocks I was accustomed to. I examined the structures before me closer, touching the surprisingly warm and very familiar cookie texture. How was it warm? It was as if that wall was just freshly pulled from the oven. I stepped back from the tempting cookie wall, which I had a sudden and slightly disturbing desire to bite into, and looked up at the building's roof to see that it was coated with some sugary, sparkly candy. It was beautiful in contrast to the white icing that danced along the other side of the structure's surface as I continued to walk. The designs reminded me of the cakes I'd admired in the baker's window at our village last season. It was a marvelous sight, and my eyes widened, trying to take it all in.

Even the snow appeared as tufts of icing, as if powdered sugar had been sprinkled into the corners of the path. There was a warmth that continued to engulf me as I walked further.

"Hello!" I heard to my left. I turned to see a man, waving from a shop window, decorated around the outside with gumdrops and sprinkled again with some sort of sparkly sugar. It sparkled in the light of the sun, which I thought had been nearly behind the mountains. It was brighter there than in other parts of the forest. The colored gum drops were enticing, but I just gave the friendly man a smile, and waved back. I would keep my eyes sharp as well as my mind. If it was a test, I was going to pass it.

What did Cole tell me not to do?

I shook my head; I could not remember. It probably didn't matter. As I continued to walk, the smell of the pastries became even more sweet, and the people seemed

even more kind. I found my cheeks hurting from my smiles as I walked on. There was greenery strung across all the buildings—festive with bright red berries, reminding me of home and how I had always decorated our small cottage with boughs from the evergreen forests near the haunted one.

That time of year, how I had always loved it, and that candy village was filled with all the sights, the smells, and I was sure, the tastes of the best parts of the season that I was missing, being trapped in the haunted forest.

There were fiddles playing off in the distance at the main square, and I hurried down the street to see them perform. As I went along, I passed by so many mouthwatering delights: sweet honey buns with sprigs of cranberry; cinnamon rolls, iced to perfection and powdered like freshly fallen snow; and winter cakes decorated in red, green, and white. I paused for a moment, trying to figure out how those cakes were iced to look like real ribbon loops around the entire cake. I wanted to try one of each, but I decided if I was going to eat, I would save that for the end. If I ate too much, then I would not be able to dance to the fiddler in the square, and the music was calling to me. I walked further past the small homes and many villagers.

Is this what the enchanted village is like? I wondered. Everyone seemed so happy, so joyous.

I made it to the center square and sat on a small gingerbread bench, where small, white iced designs danced along its edges. I was directly before the fiddlers. I closed my eyes and swayed to the music. My brother knew how to play the fiddle, which was something I had not thought about in a while. The man in the middle had similar brown hair and brown eyes and even the same body structure of my brother. I could imagine it was him playing. I closed my eyes and was brought back to the cool winter nights when he would play for me; then I had watched his fingers as they moved along the strings, and his smile as he closed his eyes, listening.

“Enjoying the music?”

I was about to grunt at the interruption, but I realized that voice was not Cole’s. I opened my eyes to see a young man in front of me. He had golden-blond hair, a warm smile, and bright green eyes. He wore a festive green coat with a sprig of evergreen tied with a red ribbon poking from his pocket. *So lovely*, I thought as I smiled up at him. Everything there was so wonderful.

“Yes, I adore the fiddle. My brother used to play,” I said.

“I wish I was musically inclined. May I sit with you?” he asked. I nodded, moving over to make more room.

We sat in silence for a few moments, and I let the music take me away again, drowning out all other sounds from the village.

“Are you going to the dance tonight?” the man asked beside me.

“I am not sure I am staying that long. I am only here to—oh, I forgot what I was here for.” That was strange.

“You are here for the dance, of course!” he said with a gleeful smile.

“Oh, of course—yes.” I paused. “How could I forget? What is your name?” I asked.

“Alan, and yours?”

“Gretel,” I said softly.

“What a *beautiful* name.”

I was surprised by his words, especially after how Cole had reacted to my name. In truth, my middle name was Gretel, and I went by it because my first name was too soft and feminine. I refused to have a soft, princess-like name when I was already so small. I needed a name with more substance. Gretel was that name.

Thinking of Cole made me grumpy, so I decided to stop thinking about him.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Have you tried the candy canes?” he asked, pulling one of the white, red, and green candy canes from his coat pocket.

“No, and candy canes are my favorite candy,” I said softly. My voice sounded thick, or perhaps, it was the air that was thick—

“They are the best candy canes you have ever tasted. Here, you can have this one.”

I looked at the candy cane. There was something about it that called to me. But also something in the back of my mind that warned me not to eat it, in a voice that sounded annoying, like Cole’s. Ugh, he was the worst. It was just like him to spoil my fun.

“I do not want to take it from you—” I said.

“No, I got it for you.” He was holding it up with a smile; how could I say *no*?

“I am not hungry. Perhaps, later?”

“Ah, here, I have just the solution!” he said, magically pulling out a cup of brown liquid. I watched as he placed the candy cane inside the steaming cup and stirred.

“Have you had peppermint hot cocoa before?” he asked.

“No! I must try some—”

Do not eat anything. Cole, he had told me not to eat anything there, but surely, sipping on some cocoa was not the same as eating. Technically, it was *drinking*.

Ha, and what Cole did not know, would not matter.

“Are you *not* even going to try it?” Alan asked me. I remembered the plant lady for a moment. She had wanted me eat, and that would have turned me into one of her plants, but Alan was not her. I was not going to get stuck there, was I?

“Last time I was given something to eat, I was almost turned into a shrub,” I said.

“A shrub?” he said with a laugh. “I could never dance with a shrub. I assure you, you are safe,” he said, and although I did not know him, there was something about Alan’s eyes—something trustworthy there. “This is a *drink*, so you will not be *eating*.”

“Oh! That is so true.” I took the cup from him and took a sip. The hot cocoa warmed my entire body, the peppermint adding the perfect amount of spice. I took another sip, and then another, and another with satisfied groans.

“You like it?” Alan asked.

“Yes!” I said with a smile.

“Well, I hope you come to the dance tonight, and if you do, I shall ask you,” he said, standing up.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile. He nodded one final time, turned, and walked away into a shop.

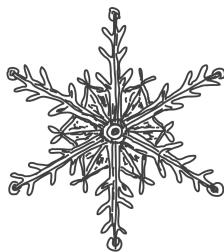
The fiddlers began to pack up their instruments, pulling me back to my surroundings. It was getting dark, and I noticed a man moving from lantern to lantern around the town, lighting them for the evening. There was a group of maidens with candles, climbing ladders up the tree in the square, placing them upon the boughs, one candle at a time, and then lighting them. I swayed back and forth, feeling such a warmth bubbling inside me as I continued to sip on the drink in my hand. Everything was wonderful. My, I had never felt so wonderful in my entire life.

I watched the villagers lighting things up around the square, thinking about how back home, we never had so many candles to place upon our tree. Maybe, we had *five*, but it was enough. We hung nuts, berries, and flowers from our small tree, and I had enjoyed that so much as a child.

When was the last time I had done that?
I could not recall, which meant it had been far too long.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Cole



I should have stayed to watch after her. That was my first thought as I walked through the candy village. It was, of course, not as it seemed. If only humans could see how everything there was just a very detailed spell. I had been too distracted with my self-discovery. *Learning that you are something different from what you believed you were can do that.* I tried to reason with myself.

My one hope was that she had remembered not to eat anything. If she ate something, the spell over this little town would keep her there in a false bliss for the rest of her days as it had so many humans before her. There were ways to break such spells, but they came at dire prices.

I walked through the candy village square, seeing Gretel dancing with a man without a care in Terra. She had a lightness in her eyes and an easy smile. She, of course, was incredibly beautiful, dancing and twirling around. Her eyes were glazed over, and I knew it, then, that she had fallen into the temptations of that place.

I made my way to her, and as I reached her, the man with whom she was dancing pulled her in closely and kissed her cheek.

I froze, then stormed up to her, pulling her away from him as fast as possible.

“May I cut in?” I asked in a tone that I thought did a good job of disguising my irritation at the man for kissing her. “Unworthy human,” I mumbled under my breath. Well, I was human, too, but still, my words were true.

“Cole! You are here!” she said, leaning into me—far too excited than I had ever seen her before. “I love this village! I think I found the enchanted village! I won!” she giggled. I looked into her foggy glazed over eyes; I missed the depths of brown that used to be there.

“What did you eat?” I asked. What temptation got her? I spun her away from me, then pulled her back against me, her body’s warmth consuming me with a need to get closer and closer.

“Eat? No, you said—” She scrunched up her nose and made her voice deeper as she continued—“Do not eat anything,’ I heard you!” she said in a singsong voice. “All I had was the peppermint hot cocoa! Alan put a candy cane in it.” She sighed as if that *Alan* was something to write home about. I was far better than him. “Oh,

Cole! Coley-Coley-Cole! I love peppermint, Cole! I lo-o-o-ove candy canes!" she said with exuberance.

"Really? You don't say. I had no idea," I said with a smirk. "You know, after the spelled plant lady, I thought for certain you wouldn't try anything here," I said in a huff.

"Oh, well, I did not *eat* anything! And there are no spelled plants here, only happy people like Alan. He is so nice; he kissed my cheek!" she said with a girlish giggle.

"I saw."

"Do you think he likes me?"

"Of course, he does," I said with a grunt.

"I wonder if he is my true love—" she said, with a dreamy sigh that made my heart ache.

"He is not," I said, looking around at the people dancing. How would I get her out of there?

"You are rather grumpy." She pouted as she pressed her warm cheek against my chest. She used two fingers to walk her fingers up my chest, then lifted her hand to my nose and poked it.

"What are you doing?" I grumbled, trying not to let a small poke pierce through my stiff demeanor. That was not my feisty, little sparrow, but she was still cute as ever.

"Trying to make you happier—you know, you are always handsome, but when you are happy—" she said with a sigh, holding a hand to her heart. "You could save the cursed royals with a face like that."

"I could, could I?" I asked, smirking.

"Indeed. Oh my, my head hurts," she said, leaning more of her body weight against me as the song ended. I held her up.

"How much did you drink?" I asked.

"Maybe too much, but—only ten cups," she groaned, holding her head in her hands.

"You will be alright. We just need to cleanse your system," I said. I knew how to help her do just that, but I hated the way it had to be done.

"System? What is that? What a strange word. I need another peppermint hot cocoa, Cole," she mumbled as I pulled her away from the people and off the dance floor, and then down a gingerbread iced street. As the cookie and candy houses thinned out and a small, normal courtyard appeared, I pulled her tightly to me.

I was breaking a rule. I was not supposed to help any of the contestants; I was there to make sure they were tested, not to help them beat the tests or to escape. There were a few ways to break enchantments in those woods, but they exacted a great toll.

But part of me was starting to believe that what we, Vera and I, did in that forest was not as pure as I always thought it was, and if Ancient Vera had lied to me about who I was and where I came from, I felt my loyalty to her waning.

"It is colder here," she said, moving closer to me as we walked down the snowy path.

"We are almost there, little sparrow,"

"Sparrow, yes, Coley, that is my *favorite* name out of all-l-l-l the names you call me, but I wonder-r-r what it would be like to he-ear you say my *real-l-l* name," she said with a sigh. "I hav-v-ve to ha-ate it 'cause it's a princess-s-s name."

"I have said 'Gretel' many times. I assure you, it is *not* a princess' name."

She waved at me and pulled my chin to look her directly into her eyes. Her small, warm hands, I never wanted them to leave my face.

"That is not-t- my na-ame, handsom-me!" She poked my nose again and pushed me away with a wobble. I was finding it more and more difficult to keep myself in check. She was spelled; what she was saying was not what she would say if she were clear-headed. But she was too cute for her own good. It was too wonderful to hear her say such complimentary things to me. Also, Gretel was not her real name? What was her name? Why did she use Gretel?

"What is your name?" I asked as we arrived at the well. I was grateful it was still there, for I knew of no other way to save a human from the candy village.

"A na-ame? What a stra-ang-ge word," she giggled.

I was losing her.

"Here, this is the wishing well."

"Oh! I wa-ant to make a wish-h-h! A wishy-wish-wish-h-h!"

"It is not that kind of wishing well. Here, you give the well a wish of *yours*. That wish will, then, never come true for you, but in exchange, you can drink from the well, and its water will take away any spell."

"Sounds bo-oring," she said, looking into the well with a frown and then leaning over its wall to call down. "Hello-o-o! You are bo-o-oring!" Her words echoed up around us, and I chuckled.

"You are spelled right now. So I need you to think, sparrow. What is one wish you are willing to give up?"

"I don't ha-ave any wi-ish, other than dan-ncing-g-g again with you-u-u and having more candy canes-s-s and hot coc-coa. I ne-ever got to tr-ry one of those hon-ney buns-s-s," she pouted.

"Focus, Gretel. What is something you always wanted but never had?"

"I wish-h-h-wish-h-h to be-e a garden-ner like my mother-r. I haven't ever tri-ied, bu-u-ut she enjoy-oyed it, so I may, to-o-o, right Coley? I will lo-ove it." She shrugged, moving to the side. I held her up as she swayed back and forth.

"You do not know how to garden?" I asked. I didn't like the idea of her giving up a wish she wanted, but that had to be one she could live without fulfilling. Gardening seemed a frivolous thing.

"No! I tru-u-uly wished to-o, grow flowers like my mother," she pouted. "I also-o wish my bro-other and fa-a-ther-r never went into the for-orest and left me-e. I also wi-ish that Fre-eddy was not fro-o-ozen, or that the guard-d-dian of the fo-orest was no-ot so handso-o-ome. He—" She paused to look at me. "Oh! Hello-o, *you-u* are han-andso-o-ome, too! Everyone is so handso-o-ome!"

"Thank you," I said softly. "Tell the well your wish about being a gardener someday. Are you okay giving that wish up, forever?"

"I ca-an always lear-earn later-r-r."

"Not if you give this wish to the well."

"Well, fi-i-ine, if you wa-ant to be me-ean," she pouted.

"I am not trying to, but you need to fix this spell, or you will be stuck in the village here, forever."

"What is *your-r-r* wish-h-h?" she asked, shifting again.

"I would gladly give the well my wish to un-spell you; however, the well does not work that way," I said, pulling her closer to the well so she could lean over and say her wish.

"You-u are ki-ind, Coley-Cole-Cole. I li-i-ike you-u-u," she said, poking my nose again. I had no idea why she kept doing that, but I liked it and smiled.

"Just tell the wishing well you wish to be a gardener like your mother."

"Wel-ly, Oh-h wel-l-l, I do de-ear-r-ly wish-h-h to be a gar-ardener-r li-ike my mo-o-other; that li-ittle sho-ovel is her-r-rs I carry ar-r-round," she said into the well. I heard her echoed wish go all the way down. I pulled her back as the bucket down at the bottom began to fill.

"You have to pull it up," I said, moving her to the lever. I helped her as she complained of the weight. When she got the bucket out, I took its ladle and brought it to her lips.

"It smells-s-s go-ood-d," she said with a sigh, and then she drank. I gave her another ladle, and another, until she began to behave normally—no more slurring of her words—her eyes unfogged, revealing the depth of her brown eyes at last.

"What is going on?" she asked as I fed her another ladleful. I placed the ladle in the bucket; there was still a bit of water left—enough that perhaps it could help her again if she fell to another spell.

"Do you have a bottle?" I asked, looking at her satchel.

"No, I don't, why?"

"We should save the rest of this," I mumbled. "Give me one second." I vanished and walked down to the candy village until I saw a shop selling waterskins. I took one and vanished back to the well. I hoped that once we left that village, it would not disappear. Sometimes, those spelled places were nothing real at all, merely illusions. However, creating something like that would have taken much power and energy to keep up; I hoped that they had some real things there, and that waterskin appeared real. I dumped the rest of the water into the skin and handed it to her. It seemed to be real, as it remained there, not vanishing like a spell.

"This will reverse a spell. Save it for something important, okay?" I said. She took it and nodded.

"What happened?" she asked, squinting her eyes. "My head—it feels fuzzy."

"I will tell you, but let's walk this way, first."

I took her hand and led her away from the well and from the magical village.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gretel



“Wait!” I called out, breaking away from Cole.

“Gretel,” he sighed, and followed me as I ran back into the candy village.

I am not sure, but I think I saw—

I turned down a street, seeing a head of brown hair, broad shoulders, and a very familiar green cloak.

Could it be? Yes! He was the one in the middle of the square, playing the fiddle. Not being spelled at least at that moment, I recognized him. I watched as he ended his song, placed the fiddle into a box, and pulled out a cookie from his pocket. He took a bite as he walked down the candied path.

As I followed him down the pathway, and he turned his head, waving to someone from a cookie store window, I froze. Cole ran into my back.

“What is going on?” he whispered in my ear, making me shiver.

“That’s my brother!” I said, keeping an eye on Hans as he continued to weave through the candy-coated streets.

“Are you sure?” he asked me as I started to walk again.

“I am sure; I gave him that cloak,” I said, moving faster and faster. He walked into a bakery and came out with a hot cinnamon bun. I watched as he took a bite.

“He fell into temptation, little sparrow,” Cole said sadly.

“Yes, but that does not make him *bad*. He was probably just hungry, and how can he be faulted for hunger?” I asked.

“Well—”

“I was under the same spell, and *you* saved me.”

“Yes, but—”

“You cannot stop me from helping my brother.”

“Of course, not, but he has been here a long time, Sparrow. I am not sure if it will work the same as it did for you.”

“Well, I must try. We just need to get him to the well.” I walked up to Hans and waited for him to recognize me, but he didn’t. His eyes were glazed over and foggy. My heart sank.

“Hans?” I asked. He was so slow to turn and look at me. There was no recognition in his eyes. As sad as it made me in that moment, I knew that was not truly him.

“Hello, lass-s-s! Have you tri-ied thes-s-se? They are divin-ne,” he said, holding up another wrapped bun.

“No, but if you enjoy that, you will *love* what I found.”

“Wha-a-at?” he asked, pulling the second bun from its wrapper, shoving it entirely in his mouth.

“Come, follow me!” I said, fear racing through me. I wanted to wrap my arms around him, so grateful to have found him, but he was not my brother yet, and I hoped the well would work for him as it had for me.

“You have to let him make a wish. *Your* well water cannot help him,” Cole said as I pulled Hans to the outskirts of the candy village, toward the well.

“Yes, I know,” I whispered so Hans could not hear.

“What wish will you have him give up?” he asked me.

“What wish did I give up?” I asked with a gasp, not remembering, as I gazed into Cole’s icy blue eyes.

“You becoming a gardener like your mother,” he said.

I frowned for a moment; it had always been a wish to learn someday. It was a sad loss, but if it kept me from the spell, I was glad to give it up.

“Are you alright?” he asked, tenderly. I was surprised by how sweet Cole could be. Perhaps, there was so much more to him, even more than him being a human stuck there in that forest.

“Yes, it is for the best. I was never very good at the harvesting of our chestnuts and caring for the fields.”

“I am sorry you lost the chance to learn more, little sparrow,” Cole said with a smile.

“Thanks.”

“Whe-ere ar-r-re we-e going? Al-l the fu-un is back ther-r-re,” Hans said, scrunching up his nose as we arrived at the well.

“This is a magical well. You make a wish, drink from the well, and you will gain a surprise,” I said, looking to Cole for something better to say.

He shrugged.

“A wi-ish-h?” Hans asked, wobbling. “I wi-ish-h for more pi-i-e. There was a cher-r-ry pi-ie that I ate this morn-ning, and I am still thi-i-inking abou-out it.”

“Other than food,” I urged him.

“I lo-ove foo-ood,” he said with a sigh and a joyful look on his face.

“Food is great,” I said softly. “But what do you wish for in your life?” I asked.

“My lif-f-fe? I am already-y at the enchan-anted villa-a-age.”

“Did you have a wish as a boy?”

“S-s-so ma-any wish-ishes-s. I wa-a-anted to be a dra-a-agon.”

Cole chuckled at that, and I glared at him. “Anything else?”

“I wa-a-ant to be a knight-t-t, s-s-someday. I pra-acticed swo-o-ord fighting in the fields-s-s back ho-o-ome,” Hans said, and I looked up, connecting eyes with Cole.

He nodded.

That was a good wish.

“Well then, tell the well that wish,” I said, pushing him so that he faced the well.

He called down “Hel-l-lo!” and laughed as it echoed.

“Focus, Hans,” I said softly. “Tell the well about wanting to be a knight—”

“I wish-h to be-e-e a great knight-t, one with ho-o-onor and someday compe-e-ete in a Torr-orren tour-rname-e-ent.”

I pulled him back, not wanting him to say too much and have everything taken from him. I heard the bucket fill, and with Cole's help, he had Hans pull up his water and drink ladle after ladle.

"He has been here a long time, so he will need to drink all of the water," Cole said as we reached the end of the bucket. Hans was still not fully himself.

"This water is sweet. I need a bit more," he said. I tossed the bucket back inside, hoping it would fill back up. When it did, Hans cranked it back and drank the rest of the water himself.

"Rosette!" Hans said, smiling so big when he dropped the empty bucket back into the well. He engulfed me in his arms.

"Hans! I missed you so much!" I said, as tears streamed down my cheeks. "I found the chestnut path you made in the forest."

"I am so sorry it led you here," he said, pulling away, shaking his head. He looked behind me, toward Cole. "Who is that?" Hans asked.

Cole's eyes looked playful as he gazed at me.

Oh, no. No, no, no, no.

"*Rosette*." Cole said my name like a caress. As much as I had always hated my overly feminine name, hearing Cole say it stirred something inside me. "Introduce me to your brother," he said with a teasing smile. He was rather pleased with himself.

"Hans, this is Cole. Cole, Hans."

"Another contestant?" Hans asked as he reached out to Cole.

Cole extended his hand, appearing hesitant. Hans's hand fell through Cole's fingers.

"What are you? A ghost?" Hans asked, stepping back. When Cole did not answer him, he looked from Cole, over to me.

"I can touch him just fine," I said, walking over to clasp Cole's cold hand.

"But—how?" Hans said, scratching his head.

"Yes, well, it seems *Rosette* has some things to catch you up on," Cole said, and I couldn't help but notice the way he kept saying my name. It made my breath hitch. Which made me internally curse his name because he was right; he did have an effect on me.

"It seems so," Hans said, looking at Cole, untrusting.

Cole moved closer so our shoulders brushed, sending an icy chill through me, making me want to be even closer. He leaned down to whisper in my ear. "We shall watch the Ancient magic in the sky together, soon, *Rosette*." His lips barely touched my ear, and I shivered, wishing he had kissed me and hating myself for it. "Still reacting to me," he said in another whisper and a soft chuckle.

Before I could smack him, he was gone.

"Whoa!" Hans said, taking a step back from where he stood a few feet away.

"Hans, Cole is the guardian of the forest. He helps to test and haunt humans, but I think he is trapped here, like you were. He helped me. I was trapped in the village, too, but he brought me here to drink from the well, and then when I saw you, he helped me save you, too."

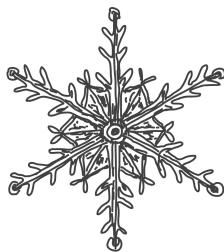
"The guardian of the forest?"

"Yes," I said softly.

"Tell me everything," Hans said, stepping closer to me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cole



“Why are you smiling like that?” Vera asked me as I walked through the hallway on the way to the library. I wondered if it was possible to discover more information about myself there. If that was my castle, perhaps, I could discover a history within it.

“I am not smiling like anything,” I said, frowning. I did not want her to know I was far too interested in a certain maiden.

“How are the competitors doing?” she asked, following me into the library.

“There are two men left—and the maiden.”

“How far away are they from the enchanted village?” she asked.

“Maybe a day or two,” I said, scanning the shelves.

“Should you not be out haunting?”

“I just needed a break,” I said, pulling a book from the shelf and leaning against it.

“What are you reading for?” she asked, and I worried that she would become suspicious.

“Nothing, just bored.” I put the book back on the shelf. I couldn’t read with her there.

“I’m going to my room,” I called over my shoulder. I tried to act how I usually did, but I wanted her to leave. Usually, she was gone quickly after I went into my room.

I waited in my room for a time before venturing back downstairs. She wasn’t in the sitting room, which hopefully meant she was gone. I walked across the foyer, back to the library, closing the door behind me.

Out of all the areas of the castle, only my room and the library were furnished and kept up to a respectable standard.

With a sigh, I removed myself from the door and walked to the shelves.

I looked at the titles, and after seeing a book of maps, I pulled it out. It was incredibly dusty and falling apart at the seams, but I carried it to a small table and opened it carefully. I did not know exactly what I was looking for. I would search for Haleston, first, then the enchanted village and the woods and see what I found.

As I flipped slowly through the pages of details on production values and costs of regions, I finally came upon a map. The top of the map, its heading confused me: *The Kingdom of Rora*.

Something seemed so familiar as I looked closer at the map. It had a picture of the forest, and there was a small spot where someone marked the map with ink: *the enchanted village*.

I noticed, then, how there was a border outlined, showing that Rora, while small, had been a kingdom. Was it possible that I was a prince from this Kingdom of Rora? And if I was a prince, perhaps, I also had a curse—

I sat down in a chair, closing my eyes. Perhaps, I was cursed to do Ancient Vera's bidding. Or cursed to haunt the woods. How long had I been cursed? The castle seemed so much older than it had in either of my two memories, where I believed I had been a human.

What happened to me? What happened to this kingdom? Who in all of Terra am I?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rosette



“I am so sorry, Rosette. Father and I thought it was a foolproof plan to get us all to the enchanted village. Perhaps, we did not think it through enough. Being alone must have been so horrible.”

“It was. I missed you and Father so much. Did you see him before you came to that spelled village?” I asked.

“No, I remember some odd things, and the creepiness of these haunted woods, but I do not remember seeing Father.”

“I fear he is trapped here, somewhere.”

“What if he made a trail, Rosette?” Hans asked, sitting up in excitement.

“What?”

“I made the trail that led you to me, but Father is the one who started it.”

“Look for another trail,” I whispered. Could it be that easy?

“The only thing is, where should we look?” Hans questioned, rubbing his jaw. He started a fire. I sat down, leaning against the nearest tree, thinking. We were quiet as I pulled out a pan and began to roast the remaining chestnuts I had with me.

“It has been so long,” Hans said from across the fire, looking at the pan full of *Carol* chestnuts.

“I soaked these, so they will be just as you remember, I hope,” I said with a smile, shifting the pan to make sure it cooked them as evenly as possible on that rugged fire in that forest. After they were roasted, it only took a few moments in the snow for the pan to cool. I ate a few and handed the rest to Hans, who happily ate, too.

“Rosette! My, I have missed these.” After all the chestnuts were eaten, we sat by the fire. I watched the flames dance around his face; it was so wonderful to have him there with me.

“I think if we find the Iced Path again, perhaps, we can look to see where Father turned off of it,” Hans said, breaking the silence.

“That is a start, but I do not know where the Iced Path is,” I said, feeling like a fool for picking up the trail of chestnut shells Hans had left as I followed it.

“Maybe Cole could help us—although, he is sort of the enemy, as he works for the forest and an Ancient, right? We can’t truly trust him. He is not one of us.”

There was a part of me that wanted to nod and agree with my brother. I was still a little angry to have been left alone, and also angry that Hans did not trust Cole, but that was all foolish. Of course, we could not trust a guardian of this forest. But Cole had saved me from the festive village—and he did not have to. Yes, he was irritating, but I had a feeling there was so much more to him. Already, he had expressed that he was a human, or so he remembered that he had been at one point.

“Yes, but if he is spelled, too, like so much here is, perhaps, he just needs us to help him, too. I can ask if he can show us the way back to the path. He would be the only chance we had at finding it and not getting more lost in the forest.”

Hans looked up at the Ancient Lights in the sky, still as beautiful as ever as they shifted their magic above us. “We still have time; I heard that once the Ancient Lights end, the competition is over.”

“Who said that?”

“Someone here, before I went into that spelled village,” he said.

“Well, we should rest so that we are sharp, tomorrow,” I said, leaning my head back against the tree, watching Hans curl up on his waterproof blanket. I noticed, then, the very fine coat he wore under his cloak.

“Where did you get that coat?”

“An old man, he—”

“Asked for food and you fed him?” I laughed.

“Yes,” he said with a smile. “How did you know?”

I pointed to my purple coat. “Same thing happened to me.”

“I would have frozen to death so many times if not for it.”

“Well, at least we passed one test,” I yawned. “Sleep well, Hans,” I whispered as he closed his eyes. I closed my eyes, too, and wondered when Cole would appear again. I hoped he would come sooner than later. Part of me hated admitting that I wanted his presence at all.

I only wanted him to come so I could tell him about our plan and ask him to help us. But then I imagined his smile and the way he had said my name. Shivers ran down my spine.

I liked him. I liked him far too much.



“Rosette,” I heard my name caressed across my cheek, and I smiled, moving closer to the alluring voice. “Rosette,” the voice said again, and I reached out, feeling something cold and solid; I felt for fabric and tugged. I shivered as *his* body was pressed against mine—finding comfort, somehow, even within his frigid temperature. I burrowed my head against his neck, taking in his smell. He smelled of pine—of winter. Chilly arms wrapped around me, and I curled into him even more. *Such a nice dream*, I thought with a sigh.

“As much as I am enjoying this—” the voice said louder. I froze, holding my breath as the voice tickled my neck, his lips whispering against my skin. “And to be clear, I *am* enjoying this, but you should wake up.”

I opened my eyes. The fire had almost completely gone down, and it was still night. Hans was snoring on the other side of the fire. I was in Cole’s arms. I looked up, met his gleeful eyes, and shoved him away, causing myself to fall backwards into the snow.

"That was the best greeting I have ever received, little sparrow," he said with his annoying smirk.

"What are you doing here, Cole? Why are you haunting my nightmares? Don't I get enough of you during the day?"

"Nightmares?" he chuckled as he positioned himself in the snow beside me. He pressed my shoulder down until I was laying down in the snow, and he was beside me, his shoulder touching mine. I tried to breathe normally so he wouldn't tease me. "I know they are your deepest fantasies; I can make them come true, little sparrow," he cooed in my ear. I waved him away like an unwanted bug.

"Stop it."

"So, your name is Rosette? Now, that is a name that suits you very well." He was looking at me, and I turned my head to glare at him. He looked ethereal in the snow, the light of the moon touching his skin and hair, bathing him in a light that made me want to draw closer to him. The shadowed angles of his face were so handsome.

"Please, I hate it," I said, covering my eyes.

"Why?"

"Because it sounds like the name of a princess; I am the furthest thing from that."

"I am not sure as I have never met a princess, but you, indeed, have the beauty I have heard princesses possess."

"Stop it."

"What? I am telling you the truth. You can believe it or not. However, believe me when I tell you that Gretel is an awful name for you, little sparrow."

"Don't call me that, either."

"But you told me you liked it," he said, reaching for my hands, pulling them from my face. His hands caressed my cheeks as he did so, leaving piercing, cool trails on my skin, and even though that should have caused me to shiver and remove myself from him, I desired even more to move closer.

He should not be this alluring. Why does my body not have a defense against the one person here that could imprison me forever in this forest?

"When?" I asked, ignoring the quiver in my voice.

"When spelled from the candy village."

"Oh," I said, my cheeks heating. I sat up, my purple hood falling off my head, bringing the frigid air onto my neck, which made me feel truly cold.

"Don't worry," he said, sitting up beside me, patting his hands on the snow at either side of him. "I will not tell anyone you like the name I created for you. It can be our little secret, sparrow," he said with a wink. "You can keep pretending you despise it—" He moved closer and kissed behind my ear, making my body shiver and then freeze.

"Let's focus, shall we?" I asked, shoving his shoulders back. "Have you discovered more about who you are?"

"I have, but I want to show you something," he said, standing, wiping his hands of snow and reaching out to me.

"Why can't we talk here?"

"Because I wish to show you something," he said, shaking his outstretched hand with impatience.

"If this is another test, I am not in the mood," I groaned, standing without his assistance.

"No, and we shall be back before your brother wakes," he said, his cool breath caressing my skin as he leaned in and smelled me again.

"Stop smelling me!" I said in a weak attempt at defiance.

"Stop smelling so good, and I shall stop."

I shoved him away, and he laughed, his voice carried upon the wind. He stood there, looking at me for a few heartbeats before extending his hand to me.

"Fine, I will go with you." I took his hand, and he tugged me into him.

I gasped, and he smiled. I scolded my body for being so easily affected by him, yet again.

"You should close your eyes," he whispered as he tugged me closer and tighter against him.

"Why?"

"Because I said. Close them," he said with mischief in his tone.

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes in irritation, but he only chuckled as he usually did, wrapped his arms around me, and then said: "Good sparrow, now, hold on tight." Wind rushed around us, and I held Cole as tight as I could, closing my eyes while grasping him for dear life.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Cole



Having her holding me so tight was incredibly pleasant. But I enjoyed it more when she was pulling me to her as she dreamed. I focused on where we were going. There was a beautiful hill that had an incredible view of the Ancient Lights against the largest mountains of Haleston. I wanted her to see them. I had spent many evenings sitting there, watching them. It would be the perfect place to tell her what I discovered.

But that could wait for a time. I wanted to show her the view, first, and I hoped she would like it. My existence had been a rather solitary one, other than Vera and the humans I haunted. I did not think anything of it before—before Rosette.

“That was terrifying.” She shivered against me as we reached our destination, and the wind settled about us. I pulled her in tighter to me; although I knew there was no need. She was safe.

“Cole?” she asked me, and I released her from my hold.

“Yes, it is rather frightening, traveling in such a way, I can imagine.”

“Where—” She gasped, and I waited, my lips stretching wide at her taking in my favorite view I had ever found within the haunted forest.

There, on that large hill was a view of the mountain’s ledge at the very edge of the forest. It was not only a clear view of the ancient magic lights in the sky in purple and blue hues, but also below us, there were miles of snow-covered trees and a softness to the air that made one want to sit and think about things that one should not possibly think about for too long unless they desired to become depressed.

“This is unlike any place I have ever seen,” she whispered reverently.

“It is a special place,” I said, looking at her, then at the view.

“The lights are beautiful,” she whispered. I watched her breath fog into the air from her warmth.

“What do the humans say about the winter lights?” I asked.

“What do you mean? Is it not magic coming from the Ancient Lands?”

“That is what it is *said* to be.”

“Yes, and there are tales about what can happen under the lights,” she said.

“Like what?” I asked.

I watched as she looked to her feet, her arm, then back at me—her cheeks a dark shade, which I could only imagine in the full light of day would be rather rosy, just like her name.

“Tell me? Especially if you seem embarrassed by it; that makes me need to know more than ever.”

“You do not know of the tales?”

“No, I believe I was once a human, and if I could remember, perhaps, I wouldn’t need you to tell me.”

“I will tell you. Only, know that it means nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do not read anything into it,” she said, unable to make eye contact with me. I would agree, of course, because she was making my desire to know what made her so embarrassed worth any agreement.

She took in a deep breath as if preparing to do something terrifying.

I silently chuckled.

“There is a tale that under the winter solstice lights, when the magic is just low enough to reach the top of the highest Haleston Mountain peak, if two lovers kiss, they shall become each other’s true love.”

“That made you embarrassed?”

“Well, knowing you, bringing up *kissing* is not a good idea.”

“Why? Because you desire me to kiss you, little sparrow?” I said seriously, no amount of teasing in my tone. What I wouldn’t have given to get the chance to truly kiss that maiden.

“I didn’t say that, and to be clear, *no*. No, I do not want you to kiss me.”

“You know what I like about you, Rosette?” I paused but kept going before she could answer. “You put on this front—this act—as if you are always offended by me, upset or angry. I do not think there is even enough anger in that little body to do any more than to stomp your foot—” Before I could finish my sentence, I was falling backwards into the snow. I, however, although taken off guard, was quick enough to tug on her coat, bringing her right down with me.

“Truly, Rosette, if you wanted a kiss under the lights of the Ancients, you only had to say so,” I tried to say in my teasing tone.

“Do not flatter yourself. You just insulted me.” She breathed against my neck, as she landed on top of me. She started moving, but I wrapped my hands around her making her unable to leave for a few moments.

“Why do you fight everyone, little sparrow?” I whispered earnestly.

“I have to because idiots like you think that just because I am small that I cannot take care of myself, and I can.”

“Just because you are small does not mean you are not fierce””

“You just said my body cannot contain enough anger inside of me—” she groaned.

“Yes, I did, which is probably why you release it so often.” She pinched me, and I gasped in surprise, my side aching from her assault.

I let her go and she lay beside me, panting in the snow.

“No one ever thinks I can do anything.”

“I know you can,” I said, turning to look at her.

“What?”

“I do not know who these people are who underestimate you, but I would never dare to do so.”

“Thank you,” she said, seemingly surprised.

“You’re welcome.” We were silent for a few minutes, and I tracked the time by watching the warm puffs of air coming from her mouth as she lay on her back beside me. She looked at the lights. I watched her.

“I could stare at these for hours; I used to when I was little. I would sneak outside and lay in the snow just like this,” she said reverently.

“The lights are mesmerizing, but I have seen far more beautiful and captivating things.”

She looked at me for only a moment with a questioning gaze before she turned back to look at the lights.

“There were other stories, too, about the Ancient Lights. Stories of men changing into bears. Of magical beings roaming these mountains and helping wandering strangers. Oh! And I also heard a story that a long time ago, before the Great War, there was a haunted castle in these woods—”

“What?” I gasped.

“A castle. You do know what a castle is, right?”

“Yes, of course, but there—only, there is a castle here; it is where I dwell most of the time, when I am not actively haunting contestants.”

“Really?”

“Yes, what else do you know about this story?” I pressed.

My mind was reeling. That had to confirm what I had found in that library. It had been right under my nose for all this time. How had I never looked before? I just accepted my life before meeting Rosette, that’s why.

“Well, there was a castle in these woods, and people thrived and were happy there before the Great War. But like everything else King Falcon touched, the mountains and the forests—this one included—were destroyed. It was said that these trees are all dead—that they creak and groan because they are actually the souls that he killed.”

“That is horrible.” *Could it be true?*

“There are so many more, too. During village gatherings, people tell stories, and they always grow larger and different. I never trusted that they were true, only interesting and creepy tales.”

As she spoke, another memory came into my mind—that of laying down in the snow, moving my arms and then getting up to see something left behind—my imprint. The memory was quick and fast, but I began to move my arms as if automatically.

“What are you doing?” she asked, looking at me. Her eyes quickly brightened as she smiled and asked; “Oh, a snow dragon?”

“Snow dragon? What do you mean?” I paused my movements.

“What you’re making—” She motioned to the snow. “You have to know what a snow dragon is. That’s what you intended to make just now—right?”

“I am not sure. I just had this feeling that I’d done this before and wanted to try again.”

“Well, you are sorely lacking in skill. Here, let me help you.” She stood up motioning for me to follow her. I did so, getting up quickly. She directed me to a fresh patch of snow—all fluffy and untouched.

“Now, you lean back and fall, spreading out your arms, moving them like flapping wings and keeping your legs still.”

I did as she instructed, feeling the movement of the snow against my arms as I went back and forth. I could not feel the snow’s temperature, but I smiled. I knew I had done that before—long ago.

"Now, if you are done, give me your hand; I will pull you up, and we can add the details."

"Pull me up?"

"Yes, if you try it yourself, you will mess it up." Not needing any more reasons to accept her help, I lifted my hands. She yanked and pulled me up. I watched as she walked around my imprint; she added ears by pushing snow around above the head of my imprint, then she pushed down snow with her feet to create a tail. Once she was done, she stepped back beside me and pointed down at the snow. The indentation did indeed resemble a dragon of sorts.

"My brother and I loved making snow dragons as children. We added sticks and pinecones and even chestnuts to embellish them. Then Father would tell us whose was better."

"How is a father to choose?"

"He was clever. Hans always had the best *big* dragon, and I always had the best *baby* dragon." I saw her scrunch her nose at the memory, then smile.

"Well, you did a fine job here—" I began as I turned to her, grasping her shoulders. "I think my dragon needs a—"

"Don't you dare say baby dragon." Her brown eyes were alight with that fire I loved.

"No, he needs a mate—his true *love*." I winked as she laughed, falling back into the snow. She made her dragon and reached a hand out for me to pull her up. I gripped her hand and tugged, moving her rather quickly into my embrace, her free hand landing on my chest. She was laughing; her face looked so magical in the twinkling lights above us. Her breaths were heavy, and so were mine. I had reactions to her, too, although it was easier for me to hide them, except at that very moment.

"Rosette—" I trailed off, wrapping my arms around her waist to move her closer to me. When she looked up at me expectantly, I wondered if she would allow me to kiss her.

I looked back and forth into her eyes and decided to ask for forgiveness if need be.

I pressed my lips to hers. She did not push or pull away. Warmth flowed through my entire being, and I felt as if I were melting, as if I was not standing in a cold, frozen, haunted forest, but I was in the desert. I moved my lips against hers, wanting to be more consumed by her. She tasted sweet and minty, like peppermint. Yes, she smelled of peppermint—then the realization finally came to me: candy canes. She smelled of candy canes. I became distracted from my train of thought as Rosette wrapped her hands around my neck. She pulled me down, so she could deepen the kiss. I picked her up so our mouths were level. She let me hold her. I did not know when I would ever get that chance again—the chance to kiss that alluring and enchanting maiden. That maiden who made me feel things when I had spent as long as I could remember feeling nothing at all.

"Cole," she whispered as we paused for air, her eyes looking intently upon mine. "Don't you dare use this against me," she threatened softly, her warm breath making me feel more alive than I thought possible.

"What? That you kissed me so passionately that—" But before I could finish speaking, her lips were on mine. This time, instead of the sweet kiss, it was as if she were showing me not to mess with her, because she wielded a power over me. As much as I wished to exude power—and I did most of the time—that small maiden, that feisty and passionate woman made me weak—weak for her. I would do whatever she asked—go wherever she went.

She pulled her mouth away from mine and dropped from my embrace, stepping back, her chest rising and falling rapidly. There we stood under the light of the Ancient magic, just looking at each other. There was something between us that seemed to remain there, even after our lips disconnected. I still felt warm.

“That was—” she began softly, touching a hand to her bottom lip.

“The most incredible thing that has ever happened in all the kingdoms?” I said, walking closer to her, but she kept backing away.

“What are you doing?” she asked with a playful smile.

“Why, coming back for more. You taste of peppermint, my little sparrow, and candy canes just so happen to be my favorite sweet,” I said.

“You do not eat,” she asked as I came closer.

“Do not try to distract me,” I said.

“No, Cole, you said you do not eat. Do you remember eating once? Because if you don’t eat as a guardian, and if you are being truthful and you remember the taste of peppermint candy canes—”

“Then I remembered something else,” I said, looking from her to the snow-covered ground.

“I remember enjoying candy canes around the time the Ancient Lights began each season. Cook would make them.”

“Maybe you will begin to remember even more as you try different things.”

“I really enjoy kissing you. Perhaps, that is all I need.”

“Cole.”

“What else could I try with you?” I said, wiggling my brows at her.

“I am serious, Cole.”

“Me too, only I did want to tell you something I discovered before I have to take you back to Hans. This forest used to be a part of a very small kingdom named Rora.”

“Rora? I have never heard of it before.”

“I figured as much, but you heard of a castle here, and there is a castle here. I found a map in the library. It’s old, pre-Falcon. I wonder if he was the one who destroyed my kingdom.”

“Your *kingdom*? ”

“Yes, because I also had a memory that the castle was *my home*. ”

“You—you are a prince?” she gasped, taking several steps away as if that was more unbelievable than a destroyed kingdom.

“It would seem so.”

“So, a *cursed* prince?”

“I am not sure. When a royal is cursed by Draken, doesn’t he tell them they have a way to break it?”

“But what if you knew and forgot?”

“I wondered that, but something feels different. I have this feeling that King Falcon was responsible for the downfall of Rora, and somehow, he is the reason I am how I am, not Draken.”

“But how? King Falcon, *may he rot in the mountain*, died and was trapped in the mountain beyond the Traitors Pass over five hundred years ago.”

“I don’t know, but I am going to keep looking. I had another memory that I used to wear a golden ring on my smallest finger, not sure if that means anything—”

“Really? Jewelry?” she said with a smile.

“Yes, and I looked dashing, I am sure you would swoon at the sight of me in gold.”

“Doubt it,” she said with a laugh. “So, you are the guardian of this forest who was once a human—a prince, who used to wear golden rings on his smallest finger. This is *so* much to go on,” she said, looking at me with a smile.

“I know, that was just what I was thinking. I will discover who I am in no time with such clues. I should probably find that ring—it would help.”

“Yes—I am dying to see you in a tiny golden ring,” she laughed.

“Yes, because I would look fetching,” I said, puffing out my chest.

Then we both laughed, and I tugged her close, sitting her in my lap so she would not become cold from the snow. We watched the lights until she fell asleep in my arms.

Nothing had ever been more perfect in my world before that moment.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Rosette



Breathing was difficult for the first time. No, that was a lie because whenever Cole was around, breathing was always a challenge. I would never admit that to him.

It was so difficult to focus on anything anymore. How could I focus when his lips had just been against mine? I had always wished to kiss under the light of the magical Ancient Lights. I never expected that it would ever happen for me.

“Are you okay, Rosette?” Hans asked as he woke up that morning to me sitting in silence, looking into the forest as the sun made things more visible, and the icy snow sparkled. I probably had a ridiculous look on my face. Could he blame me? I had just been kissed by Cole. Something he did not need to know.

“I am well. How did you sleep?”

“Well enough. I hope your friend shows himself today. We need to figure out how _____”

“You mean me?” Cole appeared before me with a smile. “Rosette,” he said, looking into my eyes, knowingly; then at my mouth while leaning in. I shoved him back. As much as I wanted to kiss him again, I could not do that in front of my brother. He stepped closer to me again making my breath hitch.

“Ah, you like it when you have me all to yourself, I see,” he whispered before pulling away and standing in front of Hans. “So, you two need help? I am not permitted to help in this forest.”

“See, I knew it. We cannot trust him.”

“But if you would let me finish, I am discovering some things now, making me question my place here, and so I shall help you.”

“See, he can help us!” I said to Hans as he continued to glare at Cole.

“What if this is part of the test? If we do not follow the rules, he will kill us.”

“No one is charged with killing anyone in these woods; of that, I am sure. Traitor Falcon, *May he rot within the mountain*, did that, not the Ancients.”

“*May he rot in the mountain*,” Hans and I said in unison.

“Can you trust me, Hans? Can you trust that I trust him?” I asked.

He looked between Cole and I, back and forth, before shrugging his shoulders and letting out a breath.

“Fine, but if you try and hurt my sister—”

“My little sparrow shall always and forever be safe with me,” he said, making my insides churn like butter. What I wouldn’t do to kiss him . . .

“Sparrow?” my brother asked.

“It is a long explanation; just be aware I dislike it.”

“She loves it. She told me her name was Gretel.”

“Gretel?” Hans chuckled. “She always said that name made her appear stronger; it is her middle name.”

“He knows. I had to tell him after you called me—”

“*Rosette?* Your name?” Hans teased.

“It is a beautiful and very fitting name for you, little sparrow,” Cole said with a smile, and I wanted to hit him but also pull him into me and wrap my arms around him and—

“We should go. Can you lead us to the Iced Path? We want to find our father,” Hans said, and I thanked the Ancients for his interruption, for my thoughts were about to run a little too wild.

“And you believe he is on the Iced Path?” Cole asked Hans.

“No, not exactly,” I began to answer as I motioned for Cole to lead us on. He began to walk, and I walked beside him, Hans trailing behind us.

“Our father used to mark paths in the woods. We grew chestnuts and would leave a trail of the husks and burrs, sometimes even the nut,” Hans explained.

“Yes, and when I found the trail Hans left for me, I knew it was him.”

“Which led you into the candy village,” Cole said, looking forward, not impressed.

“Yes, but I found Hans. I want to find my family; that’s the only reason I came into the forest.”

“I understand, but only *one* person can pass through to the other side of the forest and into the village before the Ancient Lights disappear.”

“Those *were* the rules, but can’t we make new ones, once we break you out of here?” Hans asked.

“Break me out of here?” Cole asked, stopping to look at my brother.

“Yeah, you are trapped, just as I was in the candy village,” Hans said.

“Yes, and like I was, too. My, that peppermint hot cocoa was too good,” I said, thinking about it again. I would need to have another candy cane soon—I craved it. Cole’s gaze met my eyes as I spoke; then he chuckled quietly, but I saw something glinting in his eyes, which told me to be prepared for what he said next. I doubted I could be. He leaned closer to me and inhaled near my neck, his nose brushing ever so slightly there, causing a shiver as he spoke.

“I assure you, I am not trapped just as you were. I do not *drink*, nor do I *eat*. The only thing I have tasted in all my memories are your delightful lips, little sparrow.” Then he pulled away, smiled widely, and walked on, leaving me frozen in the snow.

Blast him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cole



My mind whirled as I led Rosette and Hans to the Iced Path. I was breaking all the rules, it seemed. There was a very large part of me that wanted to turn around in the snow and kiss Rosette again. I refrained.

So many things were changing, and I was not sure how I would keep up. I continued to walk. The familiar crunching of the iced snow under my boots was strangely comforting. I was grateful for the morning light, peeking through the trees and for the miles of white snow that gleamed and sparkled in that light. I wondered what Rosette would think about a particular part of the woods I wished to show her. I paused in my thinking as I heard movement to my left. Was Vera out there spying on me to make sure I was doing as she ordered? Would she see me leading them onto the Iced Path and force me to entrap them in a spell of hers? I hated watching all the spells she cast upon the humans entering the woods. I wished that there could have been a better way to go about doing things. But I was assured repeatedly by Vera that it was what Ancient Draken wanted, and it was the only way things could work, the only way the traitor, Falcon, would stay imprisoned.

“Are we almost there?” Hans said from behind me like a petulant child.

“Hans, it takes as long as it takes.” Rosette tried to chastise him.

“I know, but it would be nice to know, is this journey fifteen minutes? An hour? How long is this going to be?”

“Why, because you have some important place to be?” Rosette asked, and I smiled. It seemed I was not the only person she was feisty with.

Stepping onto the frosted path, I stopped and turned around, waiting for them to catch up; they continued to bicker.

Something about them bickering seemed oddly familiar.

“You have no idea what peace I had being stuck inside that village,” Hans said with a laugh. Rosette glared at him and shoved his shoulder, only making him laugh louder. She was not much of a physical force to be reckoned with unless she used her shovel.

“You are lucky I got you out of there, or you would have rotted away into nothing.”

“Maybe, but I would have been happy,” Hans said, pulling Rosette closer to him, his arm wrapped around her shoulder as he messed up her hair.

A memory came into my consciousness, suddenly like a burst of bright light.

“Cole, you wish you were as fine a prince as I,” my brother said as he grabbed me by the neck and messed up my hair. I glared at him, and he chuckled, walking away toward the Iced Path.

“I had a brother,” I said, taking a weak step back as Hans and Rosette stepped foot onto the Iced Path.

“You did?” Hans asked as Rosette came to tug on my arm.

“Where is he?”

“I have no idea,” I said, looking from Rosette to the forest.

“You remembered him?” she asked.

“I did. He used to tease me as your brother teases you,” I said.

“We will find out what happened to you, Cole.”

“What about your father?” I asked. I wanted answers, but she deserved to get what she desired, too.

“I can do two things at once.”

“Oh, really? Like kiss me, and—” She covered my smirking mouth with her hand, and I kissed her palm. She did not move her hand, but she glared at me.

“What is going on?” Hans asked.

“Nothing, we are on the Iced Path,” she said as she pulled her hand from my mouth.

“Yes, the Iced Path. Shall we walk?” I asked, holding out my arm for Rosette to hold. She looked at it, then up at me.

“I am not of royal, nor of noble birth. I am a commoner.”

“Really? I thought you were the princess of the forest, Rosette.” I watched as that made her laugh so hard that she doubled over.

“Me? A princess!”

“You would make a lovely princess. I think that is my new goal: make you a princess.” I took her arm and waved with my other hand for Hans to follow us. We walked along the pathway in silence.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rosette



I watched carefully, looking as closely as I could at the snow on either side of the path. It'd been two years; I knew the chances were low, but we had to do something.

"The snow here doesn't change; it's not like a normal winter wood. Things are rather stagnant. It snows to keep the snow at the right height, but it is incredibly possible, just like your brother's path, that your father's is also still visible, although maybe frozen."

"Thank you," I said softly, surprised that he chased away that fear.

"I don't see anything," Hans said from behind us, and I was getting so irritated with his negativity. He was truly complaining about everything.

"Hans, will you stop whimpering?"

"Sorry, I am rather impatient."

"Yes, you—"

"I see something!" Hans shouted, and I turned around to see him leaving the path, toward a tree. I followed, looking where he stepped. Sure enough, there was a small, frozen chestnut with our *X* scored into the shell.

Father.

"This is him!" I said, looking at Cole, who was still on the path. I noticed then that the path was rather far away; Hans and I had gotten carried away following Father's path.

"Cole!" I called out, and, in a moment, he appeared in front of me.

He motioned for Hans and I to guide him, and we walked through the snow, following Father's path of husks, shells, and nuts, all frozen and deeper than Han's trail, but still there—Father had been there. We followed it until we reached a small, old castle. I gasped as we walked past some trees, revealing the structure.

"Is this your castle?" I asked, turning behind me to see Cole.

"It is," he said rather solemnly. "We should not be here; she will not like it."

"Who?" I asked, but as soon as it came from my lips, a woman appeared at the castle door and began to walk toward us.

"This is Ancient Vera. She is truly in charge here," Cole said quickly.

“We have guests?” Vera said sweetly as she reached us.

“Who are you?” Hans asked as she smiled at him.

“I am Ancient Vera. I was tasked by Draken himself to keep an eye on these forests and on their guardian. We have a very important mission to make sure no darkness leaks into the traitor’s path and awakens him.”

“Of course,” Hans said with a nod.

I looked down to see that the trail veered off to the left and took us in another direction away from the castle.

He had not stayed.

“We were just on our way, Vera.”

“Nonsense, come stay for a while. Cole loves company,” she said, twirling around and motioning for us to follow. Not knowing what else to do, I followed. When we reached the steps, something felt strange, and it was not that I was with some kind of man-ghost or an Ancient, or the brother I had not seen in one full year. No. It was something else, something about that castle and the steady beating, growing louder the closer we got to the door.

As the door opened and we walked inside, the beating grew even louder.

“Stay for tea; I insist,” Ancient Vera said. We agreed, and she motioned us to a very old sitting room. The chairs were remnants of its great past as well as the other furnishings, carpets, and drapes—holes and rips were everywhere to be seen.

As Ancient Vera and Cole left without a word, I walked to the door, turning the knob, but it would not move. Vera had locked us inside. Why?

“Hans, she locked the door.”

“Why would she—Is this another test?” he whispered, trying the door himself. “Cole must be in on it.” He groaned.

“No, he wouldn’t do that—”

“He just left with her, Rosette.”

“Will you help me get out of here, or will you just keep complaining?”

“Help, of course.” He huffed, walking around the room. I walked to the edge of the room hearing that strange beating I had heard before, growing even stronger. There was a wall, and as I pressed my face against it, I heard the beating louder. Was there something behind it? A false wall?

“Hans, help me—I think this is a false wall.”

He moved to the wall and felt around the grooves, and with a few tugs and a groan, the wall swung open. “How did you—” I questioned, my mouth wide open in surprise.

“What? Castles have secret passageways; I heard knights talking about them when they came into the village.”

“Because you always wanted to be a knight,” I said softly with a frown.

“It’s fine, better to be alive. Are we going to see what that Ancient is hiding?” He motioned to the staircase, behind the false wall.

“Yes, let’s go. Hopefully, this is a way out.” There was a long hallway with two doors after the spiral staircase. I walked out the first door; it shimmered, and the silver doorknob turned golden. I walked to the second and turned it, but it was locked. Going back to the golden door, I opened it.

The room was dark and dusty. In the corner of the room was a large bed, pushed up against the wall with the curtains drawn back as if to provide more space. I lit a small candle on the side table with a flint Hans handed me. With the flickering candle in my hand, I walked fully into the room. The beating was the loudest then, and it was so overwhelming. I paused as I reached the edge of the bed, seeing something there, lying still underneath a blanket.

Reaching out a tentative hand, I moved the blanket slowly.
The sight before me made me scream, but I clasped a hand over my mouth to quiet myself as I stared into the face of Cole laying there, lifeless.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Rosette



I stared unmoved from the spot when Hans touched my shoulder, making me take in the breath I was holding.

“Rosette, what is going—” He looked and saw a lifeless Cole there, too. I reached out—wanting to make sure. I touched his lifeless hand and gasped as it was somewhat warm. His chest was not rising and falling, which made me wonder, how could I have heard the thumping and beating of his heart?

“So, he is trapped here, just like us,” Hans whispered; his face looked just as shocked as I felt.

“He is in some sort of limbo or something—”

A voice came from behind us, “Ah, I knew you two would be a problem.”

We both turned around to see Vera, standing there with a grim look on her face.

“Where is Cole? What is this?” I asked, pointing to the lifeless Cole.

“What does it look like, *human*?” she spat.

“Is Cole cursed?”

“Is Cole *cursed*? ” She mocked with a questioning gaze, her hand under her chin. “You could say he is, but you could also say he is blessed.”

“He is blessed?” Hans echoed.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“He is haunting the forest as he is supposed to be doing, not falling for the competitors.”

My heart picked up pace at that.

“Why doesn’t he know—”

“He knows what I tell him, and you will not tell him about this.”

“What?”

“I know what you are here for, Rosette—”

“Gretel,” I said.

“I know what you are here for. You wish to find your family and return home, right? I can make that happen for you.”

She could? Is it possible that Hans, my father, and I could make it out of this? That I could receive more than just answers from this journey?

“Yes, you want to know where your father is. Well, he made it to the enchanted village. He was found worthy to help guard the traitor’s tomb.”

“He made it?” Hans asked, dumbfounded.

“He did, but I fear you two are not as pure as your father.”

“What?” Hans asked in anger.

“However, I can let you both enter if you prove yourself worthy and do not tell Cole about what you saw here.”

“That is impossible. I can’t keep something like this from him!”

“Oh, and you will have to stop talking to him altogether. Let him know that you have a betrothed or something, anything to make sure that you do not gain his attention anymore.”

“He deserves to know—”

“Rosette, think of it. Father, the village—it’s all we came into the forest for,” Hans said, touching my shoulder to turn me to him.

“But Cole—”

“He is the guardian of the forest; he belongs here, and if he is cursed, why should we not go?”

“But he has helped me,” I said faintly.

“Listen to your brother. Your happiness awaits.”

In a blink of an eye and a mist of red smoke, we were standing in the snow, back on the Iced Path—just Hans and I, and I had a secret that could destroy everything between me and the one man I cared for.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Cole



There was a strange sensation on my arm. It made me pause for a moment as I haunted that poor human who had absolutely no hope of winning the test, may I add. He was walking in circles, trying to find his supplies. All it took was a few cool gusts of wind and some groans, and he was totally distracted.

I wondered what Vera was up to at the castle with Rosette and Hans. I knew she would never harm them; she was tied to the forest like me, under the direction of Draken. We never killed or seriously harmed any humans. Scare them? Sure. Teach them lessons? Yes. Trap them in the forest forever? Yes. But kill? We did not cross that line, not at all.

I thought about all the things I still wanted to show Rosette about the woods. While, yes, I haunted it, it was still beautiful in different ways. I thought about the frozen crystals that hung from the branches of trees on the north side of the woods, or the trees in the west that housed dozens of sparrows. I smiled; it would be so wonderful to show her that.

In a shift of wind, I moved myself to the front of the castle. Just walking through the doors felt different, knowing that Rosette was inside. Instead of finding her, however, Vera was the only one there.

“Cole! How was the haunting?”

“Where is Rosette and her brother?”

“I thought you brought them here to find their father; I told them he made it to the village, and they were eager to find their way there.”

“Really?” I could not help but frown. They went back to the Iced Path. I wished that they would have stayed a bit longer. I hoped that Rosette could help me look for answers about myself around the castle.

“Yes, that is not a problem, is it?”

“No, of course not.”

Vera came closer to me and stroked my cheek. “You are such a good guardian of these woods.” Then she pulled away from me and walked down the hallway.

I stood there in the corridor; I wanted to go to Rosette, and I would for sure ask my little sparrow why she left, but for the moment, I wanted to investigate while

Vera was off in a different direction, doing something.

I walked to the right—to the library, with a small section for sitting near what was once a grand fireplace. The chairs were bones of their old selves, and as I stood there, looking around the room, another memory flew into my consciousness.

"I have no desire to leave. I am fine," I said to someone, but I could not see who it was, their face blurry, almost like a shadow.

"You cannot stay here; we need you back home."

"This is my home—"

"Yes, upon your twenty-first birthday, you will receive ownership of this castle and all the woods about it, but for now—"

"I do not wish to leave; I will not abandon what is mine."

"King Falcon is coming with his armies, and you know we are the smallest kingdom in the land. We stand no chance."

"Exactly, no chance, so why not die in the place I choose?"

"Because you should stand with your family and your kingdom. With honor and glory."

"I will come, but—"

"No, just come. I need you, brother; I need you with me at the end."

I stood up from my chair and walked to my brother.

"I will be with you."

"Till the end?" he asked.

"Till the end, and then whatever else is after."

The memory faded, and I continued to stare into the room. My brother—he was older than me, and that was our kingdom. We were the royals. I took a step back so I was leaning against the fireplace to hold myself up.

I had more than just a life before being a guardian. I had a family—a home—a life—even a reason to go into a losing battle and die.

Did I die along with my brother in whatever battle King Falcon had rained down upon our small kingdom?

Am I a ghost? But if I am a ghost, how am I able to touch and kiss Rosette? Or feel her warmth?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Rosette



“Hans, we have to wait for Cole.”

“No, we really don’t. You heard what Ancient Vera said, Rosette. Father—she knows where Father is. I know you may think you have something with this *Cole* person—”

“Something? What do you mean?”

“He likes you, of course, and you like him; it’s easy to see.”

“Maybe we do, but that is beside the point.”

“No, Rosette! That *is* the point! You are blind because you care for him. For all we know, he was cursed because he helped King Falcon, or maybe he is King Falcon’s brother or something—”

“King Falcon didn’t have a brother—” I trailed off.

He waved me off as if that was not a relevant point, but it was true, King Falcon did not have a brother—so there was no way Cole was his brother. That felt *truly* important.

“You are deliberately missing the point. We need to take this Ancient up on her offer. It’s the only way.”

“No, Hans, I’m not leaving him. I know that there has to be a way to both help him and find Father.”

“Rosette!”

“No! You left me! You and Father left me. And for what?! This?” I said, motioning around the woods. “Well, was it worth it? ‘Cause it sure doesn’t seem worth it!”

“But, we wanted better.”

“Is this better?” I shouted at him, with tears dripping down my cheeks. “Cole is the first person in my life who always came back for me; he was the first person to help me when I was alone; he was the first person not to look at me and see something small and worthless!”

“I’ve never said you were worthless,” Hans said quietly. “But Rosette, you have to come and be with Father and me. It is all we planned and wanted.”

"No—it is all the *two of you* planned and wanted. You never asked me. We had everything we needed. You and father decided you were no longer satisfied with the good life we had, not me. I am not even but a year younger than you, Hans, and you both always treated me like a baby—a child. You should have stayed; you should have asked what I wanted."

"Rosette, I am sorry, but we need to go—"

"No, I'm not going to listen to you, just because you're my brother. I did that before, and look where that led me! I love you, Hans, and I love Father, but I think we can make this all work and not betray Cole."

"How?"

"I think if we can restore Cole back to his body, maybe all his memories will come back. And if all his memories come back, and he's the one who haunts people here, he'll know where Father is. He must know; he's the guardian of the forest, after all."

There was a long silence as I waited for Hans to say something. He looked up at me pointing a finger.

"We can try it your way, but the moment this backfires in your face—I'm out of here."

"Fine, but we should stay on the path."

We walked in silence for a little while. I was grateful he had agreed, but it was apparent he was not happy about it in the slightest as he huffed and shuffled his feet less than enthusiastically.

"Hello, little sparrow." I jumped from my musings and turned around to see Cole behind me with an impish grin on his face

"You scared me—"

"I was surprised you left the castle. I thought we could explore a bit."

I could not make eye contact with him.

"Yes, well, Vera was nice and brought us to the path again."

"Still looking for your father. Do you think you will find him here?"

"Possibly."

"We do not need your help, guardian," Hans said, yanking my arm as if to take me backward to walk away from Cole with him.

"Knock it off!" I stomped on his foot, and he winced, but he knew me too well, and he also knew I was not easily forced into anything.

"Do not touch her," Cole said, blasting Hans to the ground with a cool breeze. Hans stood up with a shiver.

"This is the man you chose to be in love with? Really?" Hans spat. "I'll find Father my own way," he said, walking away from us and down the Iced Path alone. That did not take long for Hans to change his mind. I glared at my brother's back in irritation then looked at Cole.

His eyes were wide with mischief. Here came his teasing.

"Don't look at me like that; my brother just left, and—he was wrong, okay?"

"First, Hans will be fine if he follows the Iced Path. Second, sorry he left. Third, look at you like what? Like I want to kiss you in the snow till it all melts around us? Or looking at you like your brother thinks you *love* me?"

My cheeks heated. Curse him for being so observant.

"Because that was what that look was, just to be clear," he smirked.

"Um, Hans didn't know what he was talking about." I cleared my throat. "And don't act like you think you've won something."

"Why not? It's true, isn't it?"

"My brother—he is going to do something I need to warn you about."

“Warn me later.”

“Cole!”

“You love me?”

“No, I care for you, of course, but Cole, I don’t know you well enough at all.”

“If not love, then why are you short of breath, sparrow?” He moved closer, his impish grin making me so annoyed that I wanted to smack the look from his face.

“Like I said, I like you. It’s not as if that is a grand surprise as I did let you kiss me—”

“And you kissed me back.”

“I did—I admit it; I kissed you back, okay? You wore me down, and maybe I find your never-ending pestering sort of endearing.”

“You did kiss me back. You like me, Rosette,” he said, stepping closer to me. He tugged at my hand and pulled me closer until there was no space between us. I held my breath.

“I said ‘*sort of*’ endearing; do not forget that. It is a very important—” I gasped the words barely coming out. I lost my thought, forgot to inhale.

“Breathe, sparrow, breathe for me.”

“Cole,” I warned, but he leaned down and pressed his lips to the side of my face.

“I do not think I have ever kissed anyone before you; I was sure if I had, it would have melted me and never let me forget it. But maybe I never kissed the right maiden.”

“What did you say?” I asked, pulling back.

“I’ve never kissed anyone before,” Cole said.

“No, the other thing—”

“You melt me,” he said, leaning in to kiss my cheek again as I kept turning my face so he could not reach my mouth.

“I will eventually reach those lips—”

“No, Cole, that’s it!” I said with a laugh of disbelief.

“What’s it?”

“I know how to free you,” I laughed.

“Yes, a kiss should do the trick if you would but be still,” he grunted. I took his face in my hands.

“Tell me this, then I shall maybe kiss you—do you have the ability to help me find my father and then let us leave?”

“What do you mean?” He blinked and looked into my eyes as if awakening from a dream.

“I mean, can you help us find my father and get us safely out of the forest?”

“That is not how this works—”

I put my finger to his lips. “I understand,” I said quickly. Removing my finger from his lips before he kissed it and I lost focus. “But you are also not the guardian you thought you were, so doesn’t that mean something could change?”

“What are you speaking in riddles for? I thought we would be kissing by now,” I could not lie even to myself, his confusion and desire for a kiss was slightly adorable.

“Just answer me this, and do focus please. Do you know a way out of the forest, Cole? A way my family and I could be free?”

“The last day of the solstice, near the enchanted village, there is a way—”

“Good, Cole,” I said, taking his face once again into my hands.

“This is the kissing part right?” he leaned forward but I held firm.

“Not yet, Cole, you *are* cursed, spelled, or *something*—and I found your body; we can free you.”

“Great. Wonderful. You should have led with that sparrow.” He dipped his head down, his lips even with mine—his words caressed my lips. “Now this is the kissing part,” he whispered, then crushed his mouth against mine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Cole



“Where did you find it?” I asked Rosette.

“You are like frozen or something in a room behind a wall, but also, you are warm. I don’t know how else to describe it, but I touched your arm—”

“You touched my arm? When?”

“Just an hour ago when we were looking at you—”

“I felt something weird a little bit ago on my arm.” What did that mean?

“I really saw you.”

“But my body is in the castle? How does that even make sense?”

“I have no idea,” she said with a pause, her bottom lip pulled into her mouth. “But what if we could find a way to save you?”

My mind was reeling. Was that the answer? It seemed so.

“Let’s go back, then, and you can show me where *I* am.” I tugged on her arm, excited.

“Vera is in on it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Listen, I don’t want to make you upset—”

“Little sparrow, you do not ever make me upset. Please, I want to know. I remembered that I was a prince; this was my home here in these woods, and that is my castle, which is, perhaps, why it always felt like home. But I also had a brother. We were together, waiting for King Falcon to strike us—”

“King Falcon? Do you mean you’ve been this way since King Falcon was alive?”

“I don’t know. How long ago did King Falcon reign? I believe he took over my kingdom, Rora, after whatever happened to me.”

“Cole—” She pressed her hand on my arm, and I looked directly into her beautiful brown eyes. “King Falcon has been dead for five hundred years.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Cole



I pulled Rosette into my arms and closed my eyes as I transported us to the outside of my castle.

“Let’s find out what’s going on. Vera usually isn’t here at this time of day; it’s when she goes into the enchanted village to check in on things.”

“Who is she? Like, who is she, really?”

“She is an Ancient, charged to stay here in the forest and help guard the way to the enchanted village.”

“Did she entrap you here or was it Draken?”

“I am not sure.”

We stood there, looking at my castle. I moved closer to her; we had let go of each other when we arrived. I took her cold hand in mine, and she looked at me.

“I am here for you, Cole; whatever we discover, you will not be alone.”

“Little sparrow, this must be really serious if you are no longer threatening me, but giving me attention.”

“As annoying as you are, I like you. I care about you, okay? Don’t make this embarrassing.” She paused and looked down at her coat, then back up at me. “I should also tell you that Hans may tell Vera that I’m telling you this. But I—” She looked away from me as she paused.

“You what?” I said, tugging on her hand, making her look at me. “What, sparrow?”

“I could not keep this from you—lie to you. But I am ashamed that I entertained the idea. The idea to leave you and go with Hans to my father.”

“I cannot blame you; Vera is an Ancient after all and rather persuasive. I will do all in my power to find your father and reunite you; I swear it.”

“She said if I did not tell you, she would unite Hans and me with our father and let us leave the forest,” Rosette said, a tear dripping down her cheek.

“I want you to find your father, sparrow.”

“I want to find him, too, but what if, once you become released or uncursed, you will not remember how to get out of here? Or maybe you won’t remember where my father is.”

"I don't remember many people who come through here, and I know I have haunted them all. I must have also haunted Hans; I may be the reason he went in the direction of that spelled village."

"I have little hope."

"I promise, Rosette," I said, and then chuckled as she scrunched her face. I leaned my head down and touched her nose with mine.

"I love your name, and I will make it my goal to make you love it, too."

"Doubt that," she mumbled under her breath.

"I will do all in my power and ability to help you reunite with your family. Thank you for not abandoning me. I am honored to have you at my side."

"Honored, huh?" she asked with a smile.

"Thank you," I said tenderly.

She nodded. We stood there for a few more heart beats with our hands connected.

"Are you ready?" she asked, sensing my hesitation.

"I am not sure if I will ever be ready, but if I have you here, sparrow, I shall be able to do anything."

"I would say something back to you about how I hate you calling me sparrow, but
___"

"You secretly love it?" I said with a wicked grin.

She took a deep breath. "Yes, and if you tell Hans, I will deny it." She tugged on my arm, and we walked to the castle.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Cole



I squeezed Rosette's hand in mine as we stood at the front of the castle. I wanted to be strong and confident. But I felt as if my entire body was shaking.

Can she feel it, too? I wondered.

We walked through the doors, and I took a deep breath.

"Where?" I asked, looking down at her.

She removed her purple hood and pointed to the sitting room, the room where I remembered my brother and had the memory about the war in my past.

We walked through the door; she led me by the hand to a wall.

"A wall?"

"A secret place." She pushed and the wall moved, swinging open as a door.

"That has been here for all this time?" I said, irritated that I was too daft to not have seen it before.

"As you said, you did not remember much, not even the people you haunted. Perhaps, you have found it, and Vera keeps you from remembering that, too."

"How horrid," I shivered.

"Do you want a moment alone to look—I am sure it is very eerie."

"Stay with me, please?" I asked in what I was sure was the least manly voice I had ever used.

"Of course," she said with a smile. While I thought I liked that fire I saw in her brown eyes with her feisty nature, that side of her—soft and affectionate Rosette—felt like a privilege to experience.

I walked slowly into the cold room. Each step brought me closer to a bed with what was clearly someone on top of it. I stood before it, a sheet covering the body.

"You can do this," Rosette urged gently. I gripped her hand tightly and removed the sheet with my left hand.

I thought maybe I would gasp or collapse in shock, but as I stared at myself in human form—frozen, lifeless there—I only felt relief, something like *finally* rolling through me.

"Cole? Are you okay?" Rosette asked me. She leaned in closer to look at my face. I kept looking at myself laying there, but spoke quietly.

"Handsome, even dead, aren't I?" I said, trying to make light of the discovery.

"You are *not* dead." She walked up to my body and touched my hand. I felt a fire there in my hand.

"You feel that?"

"Yes, it feels so much more powerful than when we usually touch," I said in awe.

"You are alive—somehow suspended."

"How do I unsuspend myself, do you think?" I asked, looking again at my face and the lack of movement of my chest. That was eerie, not seeing the rise and fall of breath.

"I don't know. Maybe you can lay on top of yourself and your soul will go inside your body and restore you?" Rosette asked timidly.

"It is worth a try." I stepped even closer, breaking contact from Rosette to do what must be done to test out her theory.

I sat down on the bed and felt myself sink into my body. Hopeful, it would work, I lay down and closed my eyes.

"Anything happen?" I asked without opening my eyes.

"Try sitting up, and see if your body moves with you."

I moved my arms and sat up, then turned around to see my lifeless body still there. It had not worked. Of course, not; that would be too easy.

"What are you doing?" a booming voice called in a rumble through the castle. I jumped up to stand in front of Rosette as Vera stormed into the room.

"I thought I told you humans to leave this alone!" Vera shouted, her eyes alight with anger.

"Do not speak to her; how dare you threaten her," Cole shouted.

"It is for your own good, Cole; you are not supposed to know of your *situation*," she sneered, waving her hand at my body as if it were nothing at all.

"You mean, I am not supposed to know who I am? Why am I cursed? What is going on?"

"You are not cursed, but you were brought here for a purpose, and Ancient Draken has asked me to look after you. You are the guardian of the forest; you have power and authority."

"I already had that when I was the Prince of Rora," I snapped, walking up closer to Vera.

"I see you have begun to remember again."

"What do you mean *again*?"

"Every once in a while, you remember things, but of course, it was never *this*—" She waved her hand about. "—much, and I blame the human for that."

"I want to know everything; I want to free myself, and if I am not cursed, what is going on here? It feels like I am cursed."

"This happened to you before Ancient Draken began to curse the kingdoms."

"Give him the answers he seeks!" Rosette came from behind me with her feistiness fully intact and that fire in her eyes that I adored.

"It's okay, little sparrow—" I began, but she brushed past me to stand in front of Vera, who I could not help but note was a foot taller than her. But my little sparrow stood her ground with her hands on her hips.

"I will break his curse."

"Like I said, it is not a curse," Vera growled.

"Whatever you call it, there has to be a way to break whatever has happened to him—to restore him—and I know how."

"You, little human?" She laughed louder at Rosette.

"I do," and without saying another thing, Rosette turned on her heels and walked back to me, then around me to the bed.

Before I could register what she was doing, she was pressing her lips against my lifeless body and everything around me went dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Rosette



“**Y**ou foolish human!” Vera bellowed and pulled me from Cole. “Where is he? What did you do to him?” I said, looking around not seeing Cole anymore beside his body.

“You think this can be easily changed with a kiss? What is *your* kiss? You are a peasant! A small nobody from a tiny village! A kiss of *true love*—maybe, that is something—but *your* kiss? It means nothing, and therefore, *you* truly have cursed him!”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused. I touched Cole’s lifeless cheek. “Wake up! You must wake up.”

“You killed him. I hope you are happy.” With a flick of her wrist, I collapsed onto the floor, and she stood above me. “Foolish, foolish human!” she shouted. I could not speak for some reason, and then I realized it was because she held my throat in her hands. She was walking me out of the room, and she shoved me to the ground in front of the fireplace.

There, right beside the fireplace, lay Hans.

“Hans!” I gasped, crawling over to him.

“You have failed your tests. You two are not worthy to enter the Enchanted Village on the other side of the forest. Your punishment is that you shall be imprisoned in the forest, forever.”

“Please!” I cried out, tears spilling from my cheeks. How could it have all gone so wrong, so quickly? How could my kiss have killed him? I did not believe her, but he had disappeared, and he had not woken up beneath my kiss; I knew Cole would have kissed me back, woken up, and done something, right?

The feeling that I had hurt him or killed him made my stomach feel so ill that I wanted to vomit. Hans, too, he was there because of me. I had ruined everything.

“Do not waste your time pitying yourself—”

“I am not pitying myself, but I am mourning the loss of Cole; you said I killed him, and to think I would not mourn him, or have any reaction, is absurd. And here you have my brother; I have a heart! Unlike you!” I shouted.

“Oh, you have a heart? You are human! You and your vile kind destroyed the world!”

“I did nothing to destroy the world! You are currently destroying the world. How does it feel?”

“You are so ignorant!”

“How does it feel, Vera?” I screeched, feeling wild, but unwilling to stop myself.

“I feel nothing for you, human. You are getting what you deserve, as well as is Cole. All humans are evil even if they are useful for a time.”

“How does it feel?” I screamed, demanding her to answer.

“Shut your mouth! I don’t feel anything.”

“How does it feel, Ancient Vera, to be just like the traitor, King Falcon?”

Before I could register it, I was on the ground with my face aching from a slap.

“Don’t you dare speak to me in such a way, and don’t you DARE put my name beside his!”

“Then don’t act like him!” I wailed back, my cheek pressed against the dirty floor.

“I have a very special place for you.” She grabbed me again by the neck; the force of her power was unbeatable, and I let her move me how she desired. She walked through the castle to the dungeons and tossed me inside a cell.

“You shall rot in here, just as the Traitor King rots in the mountain.”

Before I could say anything else, she was gone, and I realized that I had no idea what would become of Hans, and I was a fool to have lost my temper.



I shivered upon the floor of the damp, cold cell, wondering if the Creator would be kind and let me slip away peacefully in the night. There was a large crack, large enough to see out of, but not to escape from. I moved to the gap, looking at the lights of the solstice, gleaming through the sky. It seemed that my cell was not underground, but a floor above the ground. Maybe it once served as a plumbing system for melting run-off. But at its current state, the forest was never anything other than frozen.

But, perhaps once, when Cole had been the prince, the haunted woods had been more like the forests around my village: cold for most of the year, but then a small season of melting.

I was going to die there; Hans was probably going to die—and Cole. Cole was dead, and it was all my fault. I would also never see my father ever again.

I moved from the slivered view of the life I’d never return to, and curled up into a ball. I played Cole’s kisses repeatedly in my mind—the feeling of bliss and happiness. I also thought about Hans, his goodness, hope, and smiles. Then my father—wherever he was, I hoped he was alive and happy. If he truly was in the Enchanted Village as Vera said he was, I hoped he would live a happy life until the end of his days, even though Hans and I could not.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cole



I opened my eyes slowly as the room came into focus. I blinked.

Is Ty all right? Where is he?

I sat up, looking for my sword, but it was not at my waist in its sheath; in fact, I didn't even have my sheath, and looking around, it appeared that I was in some bed. I stood up, surveying my environment for a few moments, feeling a bit confused. I made my way over to a door and wondered if I was in some secret room within Ty's castle that was unfamiliar to me.

Where is Tyberius? I wondered. As I walked through the door, I realized that I was in my own sitting room; I paused. It was my sitting room within my small castle in the woods, but everything was destroyed, but clearly not by Falcon's army and soldiers, but with age. The once grand fireplace was cracking and crumbling from the decay of time. My favorite plush red velvet armchair was a skeleton of what it once was, also in disrepair, cracked and torn.

What happened? What kind of magic is this, this strange magic that makes everything appear old? Why am I here at my castle? Last I remembered, Ty and I were side by side, holding our ground at his castle's gates.

“Ah! It worked!”

I turned around to see a striking woman—no, she had to be an *Ancient*, as sparkles and blue smoke floated about her.

“Prince Collin,” She paused, and I scrunched my nose. I hated my formal name, just as my brother hated his.

“Cole, if you will, Madame Ancient,” I said with a bow.

“Yes, of course, ‘Cole.’ It is so lovely to see you up and about after all this time! I am not sure if you remember me; you were badly injured when I found you,” she said, walking over to me. “I am Ora, and I rarely see anyone from *before*, other than magical beings, of course.” She walked closer. “I have been waiting a long time for this moment,” she said with a smile.

“I am confused—”

“Oh, of course; I am so sorry. Do you remember you and your brother? You were fighting at his castle?”

“Yes, is he okay? How am I still alive? We were so certain we would lose our lives.”

“Unfortunately, that battle, though hard fought, was lost.”

We lost. What does that mean, exactly?

“While your kingdom was lost, and Falcon destroyed most things in it, I was able to get most of your people out and save their lives by smuggling them into the nearest Haleston villages, and beyond.”

“So, the citizens of Rora are alright?” I asked.

“There are many surviving families from your court and kingdom, yes,” she said with a smile.

“But we did not win; what happened to my brother?”

“Well, you see, the battle raged on for five days, and I was so impressed that such a small kingdom would stand up so valiantly against Falcon. Your knights served you well, and those who died, died with the highest honors. Your kingdom was the only kingdom that the Traitor King ended up overpowering. I believe it was because of all the trouble your small kingdom caused him, and I believe that he did not want to go through that again in the future, especially as the other kingdoms were much larger. So, instead of overtaking the other kingdoms, he managed to gain allegiances from many of them. While, of course, that was not great for the kingdoms of Terra, I have to believe it did cause fewer deaths.”

The information swirled around in my brain as I tried to let it all sink in. Our kingdom, while small, had always stood for the Ancient ways, and we worshiped the Creator. We were small, but never was there a more loyal people than the people of Rora. That was true.

“Where is Ty?”

“Tyberius was hurt even worse than you were, for near the end of the battle, he dedicated himself to protecting you.”

“Is he—is he alive?” I asked, unsure if I wanted to know the answer. Knowing if she told me that my brother was dead and that he died trying to protect me—well, that would be hard to handle. Ty was a better man and a better prince than I ever could be.

“Things didn’t go exactly as I’d hoped. It was one of my first attempts at saving humans, and both you and your brother needed time to heal, and I suspended you and your brother for a time in a sort of ‘in between.’ I did not realize that your soul would leave your body while you were in that state, but then it began to depart. You were supposed to stay with your brother at his castle, and I hoped that you both would return together, but Vera must have taken you here. I need to speak with her.”

Vera, the name was familiar. Yes, she was the Ancient woman who lived there with me in the castle. I had been a spirit of some sort, unable to eat or drink or feel things.

Feel things—I began to feel things. How did I come back from the “in between”?

“Where is she?” Ancient Ora asked, looking around the room as if someone might have been hidden there.

Wouldn’t she know, already, I wondered.

Ancients had many gifts, as well as the ability to read minds and to interpret emotions. They knew where people were.

Who is she looking for?

“Who?” I asked.

“Your true love, of course. The enchantment I placed upon you could only be broken by *true love’s kiss*.”

“Someone kissed me while I slept, and they are my *true love*?” I was even more confused. “Even though I have never met them?”

“You know her; when you were in your spirit form, you met her.”

“I do not remember that much—so far, only Ancient Vera, and yes, I was a guardian.”

“With time, it will all come back,” she said with a smile. “Her name is Rosette,” she added.

“Rosette?” I said. The name was so familiar, but I could not grasp how I knew it. It was like smoke, where something was there, but it was blurry, and I was unable to reach out and take it and pull it back to my memory.

“Yes.”

In another puff of silver smoke, a second being appeared.

“Theodore, I said that I could handle this one on my own,” Ancient Ora said under her breath, speaking to the newcomer.

“Yes, but you were so excited. I had to know why.”

“I was not—”

The man in a brown cloak, “Theodore,” came up to me; his hood was shaded so I could not see his face.

“I am Ancient Teddy. What is your name, and why is Ora so excited to see you?”

“I cannot tell you much. I am just coming up to speed about what is going on.”

“He is Prince Collin—I mean *Cole*—from the lost Kingdom of Rora.”

“Rora? That is an adorable name,” Ancient Teddy said.

I pulled my shoulders back in irritation.

“It is not ‘adorable’; it is a strong kingdom, blessed with Ancient magic above it, flowing in from the Ancient Lands.”

“Ah, not so strong *anymore*,” Teddy said back, and Ora shoved him away from me.

“Well, I need to speak with Vera,” Ancient Ora said with a sigh.

“So, my brother? Is he all right?”

“He is still in the ‘in between,’ but I have seen his future, and someone may just save him.”

“I want to go to him. I can help—” I was interrupted.

“Unless you are his true love and kiss him, you can’t help him,” Teddy said with a laugh.

“I can be at his side,” I said, looking back and forth between the two Ancients.

“He is in his castle, and it is hidden quite well. If you can find it, you will see him. But once he wakes up, I am sure he will find *you*—two brothers who are bound by blood and honor.”

“I would suggest finding your lady love,” Ancient Teddy said, wiggling his fingers. He was a strange Ancient. One I had never met the likes of before.

“I have never been in love,” I said, but I was suddenly unsure about that, as a fuzzy image of that *Rosette* person seemed to float around in my mind.

Who is she? I wondered.

“Do not worry, Cole. You should remember that part of your life very soon. Give it a little time.”

“Maybe take a nap,” Ancient Teddy said with a nod.

“Haven’t I just been sleeping for—how long have I been in the ‘in between’?”

“Longer than Briar if you can believe it,” Teddy mumbled, but I looked to Ora, the more informative Ancient of the two.

“It has been five hundred and thirty-four years since you and your brother ruled Rora. That was before King Falcon destroyed the world, destroyed Terra.”

“He destroyed the *world*?” I asked.

“He did; the lands are not the same as they were, but things are getting better. Ancient Draken is cursing royals—the ones who sided with Falcon, but humans have found ways to break their curses,” Ora said.

“Maybe death would have been best for me,” I said, leaning my head against the crumbling wall.

“The Creator has need of you, and you have love here,” Ora said softly.

“A *love*? You say I have ‘a love,’ but I cannot even remember her.”

“With time, you will,” she said gently, walking up to me.

I did not move to face her.

“I will search for Vera, and once I find her, we can restore your castle. You deserve to have it as it once was.”

“What about the people of Rora?”

“No one in all of Terra even knows that this ‘Rora’ ever existed, I am sure. It was so long ago, and I have never heard of it, and I am an Ancient,” Teddy said.

“I am afraid there is no way to find all your people’s posterity, but if you wish Rora to rise into a kingdom again, I am sure the Haleston royals and you can come to some agreement. The Haleston royals, today, are not as King Falcon was. I must go, but I shall return.” In a snap of her wrist and a puff of blue smoke, she was gone.

“I will return later, too. Do take that nap; there is nothing better for a confused and weary mind than a nap, other than the embrace of a woman, and it seems your woman is gone.” In a puff of silver, Teddy was gone, too, and I was alone in the castle.

I wandered through the hallways until I reached my bedroom, or what had been my bedroom. It looked different, but at least the bed had been replaced with a new one, and the linens appeared clean. I walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge. Looking at the ring on my pinky finger, I paused.

That was the ring my mother gave me before she passed, and she had instructed me to give it to my future bride, someday. I had never found a bride before the battle against Falcon.

But, when in the “in between,” I had found my future bride? Who was she? Where was she, and why did she leave after she saved me?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Rosette



Everything was dark. I waited with my face pressed against the cool stone floor of my prison cell. I waited for the sun to peek through the cracked wall. It seemed days, instead of minutes or hours, before the light trickled in. That light was not a beacon of hope for me; it only shed light on my current situation and the horror of the choices I had made.

“Cole,” I whispered into the morning light, followed by “Hans, Father, I am so sorry—”

“Rosette? Is that you?” I turned toward the noise. Shifting and picking myself off the cold floor, I looked behind me to see a man hunched over in the cell beside mine.

“Hans?” I gasped, moving to the bars that were between us. He moved against them, too, taking my hands in his.

“What are you doing here?”

“That Ancient woman? I called for her. I asked her to, please, take me to where Father was, and I am ashamed that I wanted to leave you. I was upset that you chose some stranger over me and over finding Father.”

“I did not choose Cole over our family. I thought Cole could help us. I hoped there was a better way. I thought—” I choked, finding the words was hard to do. “I thought so many things, but Cole is dead, and we are here because of me.”

“Can he die?”

“The Ancient Vera said I killed him,” I answered.

“How can you trust her, though? Sorry to be unkind to an Ancient, *may the Creator forgive me*, but she seemed to have one screw loose in that brain of hers, if you know what I mean,” Hans said, placing his face against the bars. “I am so sorry that we got into this mess. If I had not gone into these woods—”

“We had a plan. Father led the way, and you were simply doing as you were told. I was, too.”

“We had a good life; I miss it, you know? I miss harvesting our chestnuts, even helping Father roast them and sell them in the market square,” Hans sighed. That seemed like a lifetime ago for me, not just mere days.

"Our life was simple, but good," I added faintly, wiping tears from my eyes.

"What is she planning to do with us, you think?" Hans asked.

"Keep us prisoners here in the forest, like all the others, like Cole and so many more."

"She has to be stopped; this cannot be what the Creator wants."

"I am not sure how she could ever be stopped, especially as she is an Ancient, the highest power in all the lands. We are doomed, Hans."

"I can't help but feel like we can get out of here. This cannot be the end, Rosette."

"I do not know how else it can end. We are human, and simply by being born in Terra, we are the Ancients' enemy, and I guess until the end of time, we shall always pay the price for what our ancestors did."

"This, this is not right. It's not fair. We are not responsible for what some dead people who share our blood did long ago," he huffed, hitting the bars of the cell with his hand with a groan.

"I am so sorry, Hans."

"At least, we know Father is happy and in the enchanted village."

"Yes," I said softly, but the truth was that we did not know if even that was true. How could we ever know what was true and what wasn't? There was no point in creating more worry for Hans, so if that one thing brought him some peace, then I would let him have that peace.

"Well, this is a sticky situation," a voice spoke.

Hans and I both turned to see a man in a brown cloak appear before us. An ancient—I had had enough of those Ancients to last me a lifetime.

"Hello—ah, I should have known you two would be leery of me." He stepped closer, right up to the bars, his face shadowed by his hood.

"Who are you, and what do you want with us?" Hans demanded.

"Yes, what are you doing here?" I asked.

"Calm down. I am only looking around, checking out this castle and looking into what Vera has been up to. Ancient Ora is, or I should say *used* to be, friends with Vera, but it appears that Vera has done some things Ora does not see eye to eye with her about. So while they are arguing, I thought why not pop in and look around this little castle, and would you know it; here, I find you two!" he said, slapping his leg and laughing as if someone had just told the funniest joke he had ever heard. "Although I knew you were here before I looked because I am an Ancient, and I know a lot, but I am happy to discover you here, anyway."

"Well, we would rather not be here at all," I said, annoyed.

"Are you going to free us? Because unless you are, please leave us alone," Hans said in despair.

"No. I am not going to free you. Wish I could, but I am not allowed to help in such a large way. We Ancients try to help in small ways, more like guiding you to better outcomes. If we just popped in and out and did everything for you, well, you would never grow."

"Grow," I scoffed, rolling my eyes.

"However," he said, not bothered by my mocking. "I do know someone who can help you escape." Without saying anything else, he disappeared in a puff of sparkling, silver smoke.

"Why would he just leave after saying that!" I shouted, and heard my voice echo in the room.

"Incredibly unhelpful," Hans huffed.

The way he disappeared reminded me of Cole; although it was different, of course. A few tears dripped down my cheeks. Even if I was rescued, how could I

live my life, knowing that I killed Cole? All he wanted was to find out who he was, why he was there, and I rashly ruined that hope for him.

I honestly had been surprised by the strong feelings I had for Cole. I had known him for just over a week, and he had already burrowed his way into my heart. How could someone do that? I was always one to believe that love was a long journey. It took years to discover it and to then develop it. What I had with Cole, felt like the start of love. I knew I cared for him deeply, and if we could have had more time together, I knew I would have fallen hard for the irritatingly handsome man—Cole, the guardian of the forest. What I would not do to hear him calling me his “little sparrow” again.

More tears fell at that thought.

Maybe it doesn’t matter the length of time you know someone. Maybe, sometimes, you can meet someone, and even though you only have a moment with them, they can change your life forever.

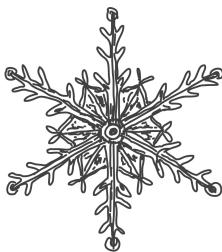
Cole did not shy away at my words; he kept coming back over and over again. While yes, at first, it had annoyed me, I began to count on him. He was my safety and my steadfast beacon in the forest, something I had not expected. If he was truly gone, it would be a great loss for the lands of Terra.

“Maybe this isn’t the end,” Hans said faintly, pulling his cloak around him.

“Maybe,” I whispered, but I had not even an ounce of hope as I stared at the light through the crack in my cell, waiting for it to ebb into darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Cole



There was a popping sound that stirred me from my slumber.
“Ah, there he is!”

I turned to the fireplace inside my room to see the hooded Ancient there.
“Roasting chestnuts. You don’t mind, do you?”

I shook my head. There was something about *chestnuts* . . . my mind was still fuzzy about things from the “in between.”

“Don’t worry, I have some for you.” He walked over to me, handing me a bowlful of roasted chestnuts.

A memory flashed before me.

“My family makes the best roasted chestnuts in the entire blessed and cursed lands.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes!”

“It is a pity you cannot have one,” a voice that seemed so familiar had said.

“Remember something, prince?” the Ancient asked, pressing me.

“Yes, actually. A maiden, she was roasting chestnuts by a fire in the snow, and she said that she and her family harvested chestnuts every year in the winter. She offered me some, but I could not eat them.”

“Of course not, you were in the ‘in between’—not fully dead and not fully alive.”

I looked at the bowl and picked up a nut. I wanted to know what it tasted like.

“Go on, try it. I doubt it’s better than the Carol families’—”

“The ‘Carol’ family?” I asked. It sounded so familiar.

“Yes, for hundreds of years, even before the Great War, they have been harvesting chestnuts. You will never find better ones in all the lands,” the Ancient said.

“But these are not them?” I asked, looking down at them. The skin of the chestnuts were scored across in a straight line. The ones the maiden had prepared were scored with an *X*.

“No, I couldn’t get my hands on them. The family sort of disappeared.”

I touched the nut, and another memory came into focus: a girl in a purple coat—her teasing smile and her rather feisty nature that made me smile. That—that had to

be the girl who saved me. She was from the Carol family, a family that I had known about when I was a prince, five hundred years earlier.

“Where is she?”

“Who?” the Ancient asked, popping a chestnut into his mouth. I couldn’t remember her name. “Still struggling with that memory?” he quickly asked, and with a flick of his wrist, the window in my room opened and air flowed in, icy and cold.

I looked to the open window, and the daylight made the cold, harsh, snowy landscape look less severe, and it sparkled. Suddenly, a small brown bird landed on the ledge, and I watched it for a moment. The birds were entirely common in our forest; there was an entire grove of trees that my mother had hated because she could never enjoy it due to all the loud squawking. I smiled and moved a little closer. The bird was so slight, but its chirp was loud and strong, along with its erratic behavior. I watched its quick movements and smiled. It reminded me of something.

“Ah yes, a sparrow,” the Ancient said from behind me. “Really wonderful birds, sparrows.”

I looked at the bird, and in a flash, it all came back to me. Being a ghost in the woods, haunting human after human, doing anything and everything Vera wanted me to do in the name of Ancient Draken and the Creator. Years, I had spent so long stuck within that forest. I remembered times when I had discovered myself hidden there, near death, in a secret room, and Ancient Vera had taken away those memories, sending me back out to haunt more humans.

I stepped back.

“Ah, you are remembering?”

“I haunted this forest; I hurt my people—”

“Technically, they are Haleston’s people, now, but yes. You did not truly know what you were doing, however.”

“Yes, but—”

“Listen, the more I learn here, the more I see that Vera—” He popped another chestnut into his mouth, and I had to wait for him to swallow it before he went on. “—seems like one of the worst Ancients I have ever heard about. Corrupted, somehow, so I would not blame yourself.”

“Sparrow,” I whispered under my breath, looking from the bird to the Ancient. “Rosette, where is she?”

“Ah! Finally!” the Ancient said, setting his chestnuts aside and walking up to me. He placed a hand on my shoulder.

“We should go now before Ora comes back and tells me I can’t help anymore.”

“Help?” I asked, as he led me from my room and down to the foyer.

“What do you think the chestnuts and the sparrow were about? A happenstance? No—those types of clues are rarely just by chance, Prince. Most of the time, it is the Creator working in your favor, and I will say, he loves to have us Ancients help him. Although, Ora seems not to like how I help; however, I will say that I am growing on her, and getting better with my assistance.”

“Is this all really necessary?” I asked, annoyed at his ramblings. “Where is Rosette?”

“Sadly, she and her brother are locked in the dungeon.”

“Then, let’s go to them.”

“We can, only you are not as you once were when you had some of Vera’s magic to help haunt and move about the woods. Now, you are simply a human prince, not special, just ordinary—”

“And?”

“And the cells are locked.”

“I don’t care. I am going down there and breaking down the walls if I have to.”

“If you tear down the walls of the prison, you will destroy your castle. Ora was very specific about giving it back to you when you woke up. I heard her and Vera speaking about it.”

“What is a castle if there is no one to share it with? Let us go rescue my true love.”

“Let’s!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Rosette



I had a crick in my neck, but I didn't care. I lay there, still pressed against the cold stone floor. Hans had tried to talk with me a few times, but I couldn't speak. My mind was still reeling and fearing the worst. I was sure I was going to rot in that prison cell. As much as that would hurt, what would hurt worse would be to watch my brother also rot right beside me and not be able to do anything about it.

Purest torture was this: killing someone I cared for, abandoning my father, and getting my brother trapped, watching him die a horrible death there beside me.

"Rosette."

I heard my name but still could not move. My mind was playing ridiculous tricks on me because I had changed Han's voice into Cole's, and that made tears drip down my face again. I shivered.

"You're alive?" I heard my brother say.

Sadly, yes, I was alive. I still did not speak.

"What is wrong with her? Did Vera hurt her?" It must have been Ancient Teddy coming back.

"She's—well, she thought you were dead, and we are in these dank cells. It does not really breed happiness in here."

"I'll be right back. Hold on, Rosette." Again that voice sounded like Cole, and it ached.

A few moments later, I was shaken awake. It was dark, and I was unsure if my eyes were truly opened or not. But then I saw the moon and the lights reflect against the floor of my cell from that crack I had been watching through. I looked up to the person touching my shoulder. Warmth flowed through me.

It could not be real. My cruel mind—this cruel forest—they were torturing me with a vision of Cole, there, right before me. Without much thought, I touched his cheek. It wasn't Cole; the man was warm, and Cole was always cold.

"Little sparrow, speak to me, please?"

Sparrow? My mind, truly, was good at creating a beautiful image. Perhaps, I should lean into this fantasy. Maybe I am close to death, and the Creator is letting me imagine Cole once more.

"Cole," I whispered and caressed his cheek, the warmth making it hard to focus.
"I know it is not really you, but I am so sorry—"

"I am here, sparrow. I am."

"Rosette, this is Cole. You did not kill him," Hans said, touching my face with his rough hands. I looked at my brother.

"What? No, Cole is always cold; this is a trick, although a beautiful, torturous one."

"It is not a trick," the vision of Cole said, pulling me up to stand, but my legs and body were weak from lack of sustenance. How long had I been in that dark cell? I was so weak that he carried me, lifting me into his arms. I buried my face in his neck. He smelled like Cole. What a beautiful fantasy.

"She needs food. Maybe after she eats, she will believe it," I heard Hans whisper. I was being carried, and never had I ever felt more at peace and warm and well. It was such a blessing from the Creator.

Take me, now, I am ready. I can pass on now—travel to the Ancient Lands and be with the true Cole if he will have me, I prayed.

I was set down onto a bed, and blankets were placed over me. I was so warm.

"I will get her water and some food. Watch her," the Cole look-alike said. I smiled at him and grabbed his arm.

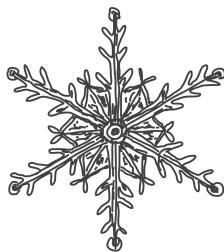
"You are a beautiful lie, and I am grateful to you before my end. Even if this isn't real, thank you."

The man moved closer to me; he brushed his warm lips against mine. Light struck through me and made my soul light. The kiss was much too short. But after he removed his lips from mine and pressed his forehead to mine, I closed my eyes, feeling consciousness drifting away.

"No lie. I am here, my little sparrow, and you will be well."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Cole



I walked as quickly as I could through the castle. I wished that I could disappear and then reappear in another location as I used to when I was in the in-between. I had to hurry. She needed food and water right away, and only I could get it for her.

Walking through the kitchens, it was clear to me that no one had eaten there in far too long. It was growing wild with vines and weeds, ice covering sections of the floor, and there were areas where it looked as if small animals had taken up residence.

Where can I find food? I asked myself, running a hand through my hair. A rabbit crossed my path, giving me pause. Perhaps, I would have to capture her some food.

The snow melted easily over a fire within the very old fireplace; the iron pot somehow survived after over five hundred years, and I was grateful for it. After the water was at a boil, I placed the rabbit meat I had prepared inside, and waited for it to stew. Even if she couldn't eat the meat, the broth would be good for her. I walked back and forth, pacing, grateful that my brother and I had been on so many hunting trips so that I could prepare at least a very simple meal for her. If Rosette did not recover, I could not move on. I knew when I first saw her on the outside of the haunted woods with that defiant look upon her face, that she was going to change my life, and she had. I owed her everything.

She was everything.

Ladling some of the soup into a half-broken cup, I walked quickly back to my room, where Rosette rested upon my bed. Hans sat beside her, holding her hand. He looked from the sleeping Rosette to me and stood. I went to her bed, moving some hair from her face. She stirred a little.

"Sparrow," I whispered, as her eyes opened, those beautiful brown eyes, looking at me with surprise.

"Cole?" she asked as she began to sit up.

"It's me, in the flesh," I said, raising my hands out and turning around, being careful not to spill the broth in my left hand as I did so.

"You died—"

"No, you saved me, little sparrow."

She rose from the bed, and I quickly placed the cup on the side table, and I pulled her into my arms.

“Vera—She told me I killed you!” she cried in my arms. I looked down at her face and wiped away those tears.

“Vera is a filthy liar, and Ora is taking care of her.”

“Cole, I am so happy you are alive!” she said once again as she caressed my face, seeming to memorize every inch with her fingertips, which I did not mind in the slightest. The smell of peppermint candy canes made me desperate; I desperately needed to kiss those lips.

“It seems you love me, little sparrow,” I said, wiggling my brows.

“What? I do not—that is—I care for you, *yes*. But I have not even known you for two weeks.”

“Well, if you don’t know that you love me yet, I will wait. If we just keep on going the way we are, you will fall in love with me, eventually, and all will be wonderful.”

“I am not so sure it shall be that easy,” she said with that look of defiance I loved.

“With you? Probably not, but I do not care how difficult a task it is,” I chuckled. “I am not faint of heart, and I cherish your feistiness.”

“Okay, while this is great and all, it’s kind of making me want to throw up, so I am going to just go—” Hans groaned. I turned to see Hans with his face partially covered by his hand as if blocking us from his view.

I chuckled.

“Hans!” Rosette moved out of my arms, which brought a frown to my face. I was not ready to stop holding her. She wrapped her arms around him.

“Rosette, we made it out. All will be okay,” he said, patting her back. “I will let you two speak alone. You were right to trust him. He saved us.” Hans removed himself from Rosette and nodded to me, then left, closing the door behind him.

“You saved us?” she asked as if surprised.

“It was only fitting. You did save me,” I said, walking closer to her with a saunter. She appeared leery, stepping backward until her back was against the wall, which caused me to smile.

“It was only a kiss,” she said.

“A kiss of *love—true love*, my little sparrow.”

“Possibly, but like I said, I am not certain that I *do* love you.” her brows furrowed. “You are irritating.”

“You love it, Rosette.”

“Do I?” she asked, as I leaned in to smell her, my hands coming to rest on the wall behind her on either side of her head.

“You still smell like peppermint.”

“I still have a few candy canes left. You never know—” She gasped as I kissed the side of her neck, and her hands wrapped around my neck as she gulped.“—one never knows when they will come in useful.” She finished as I moved to look into her eyes.

“Good point.” I winked, and her cheeks grew a dark pink.

There was a loud blast, and we were pushed apart. Hans flew back into the room, breaking through the door. Rosette was on the floor, and I was thrown to the other side of the room, against the bed. Groaning, I crawled over to Rosette, covering her body with mine as I looked over at the red smoke, fluttering into the room—Vera.

“No!” Vera screeched as she came into view.

With another pop, a smoke of blue overpowered the red, and Ancient Ora appeared.

“Vera!” Ancient Ora bellowed.

“No, they are humans; they do not deserve freedom!” Vera screamed, looking wildly from me to Rosette, then to Hans.

“You need to leave. If you do not, I will curse you, Vera,” Ora said sharply.

Ancients curse each other? I questioned.

“You would not dare!” Vera shouted, glaring at Ora.

“They have true love, Vera. If these humans were so corrupt, they could not have something so pure,” Ora said.

“No, it is a lie; the little one only wants to go into the village. She is too greedy —”

“Hey!” Rosette said, moving from beneath my protection as if she intended to stand up and face off with Vera. I knew Rosette was feisty and had a temper and did not like being called “small” or “little,” but she *was* small in stature.

“Sparrow, calm down. Save that temper for someone else,” I whispered. “Namely, me.”

“I—” she said, moving her hand from mine. I sighed and helped her up, standing beside her to protect her in case Vera did something.

“Do not speak to me, vile little human girl!” Vera snapped.

“I am not just a ‘*little* human girl!’” she shouted back.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, trying to anchor her.

“Truly, she may be small in size, but she has a big heart, and her words are sharp,” I added.

“Thank you!” Rosette said with a nod, still glaring at Vera.

“I am going to curse you so that you will be so small that no one can even *see* you.” Vera raised her hand, and I moved Rosette to stand behind me, and I braced myself for a curse, but there was a loud pop, and I opened my eyes to see only Ora in the room.

She was holding a glowing hand mirror before her face. A scream came from within it.

“I do hate entrapping my kind. You will be released when you calm down and stop hating. Your soul is corrupted with hate, Vera!” she said, looking into the mirror, then placing it beneath her cloak. It disappeared, and she looked at both of us.

“So sorry. I was trying to reason with her. So many Ancients, here, still hate humans. You see, we cannot return home. The Ancient gates are locked, and we cannot get through them. Some of us have let that loss grow into a hatred for humans. But I assure you, there are more who have moved past that and have no ill will toward your kind. I just need to speak with one more person before I go. Draken!” she called, and her voice shook about and rang through the entire room. Rosette turned and wrapped her arms around my waist, pressing her cheek to my chest. I pulled her close, holding her safely there.

There was a rumble and then a loud pop, and black smoke settled around a man in the center of the room. He had black hair and fair skin. I had never seen Ancient Draken before, but I knew he was a strong and powerful Ancient.

“What?” he called, looking at Ora in irritation.

“Look what you did,” she said with an intense rage.

Ancient Draken looked around the room.

“I did not curse that human; *you* did,” he snapped.

“I did not curse him. I *helped* him, and you had no right to have Vera take him from his brother and bring him here!”

"I needed someone to guard these woods, Ora. They lead to the enchanted village and to the Traitor's Pass! Do you want humans entering that area who do not belong?"

"No, of course, I do not want humans there if they might free *him*—but Draken! You just do whatever you want, always have, and you must realize your rash decisions not only hurt innocent lives, but also, they hurt me! Do you even care anymore about that? Do you care about *me* anymore?"

"Ora, you are fine," he huffed.

"Am I? I don't know what I have to do to get you to understand that the past is the past! You must move on," Ora argued, walking closer to Ancient Draken.

"I have no idea why you hold so much love for *them*—no idea how you could after the part you played in all this," Ancient Draken spat.

"That is not fair," she whispered.

"It's not? Oh, I am sorry; how dare I speak the truth," Draken said, walking closer to her.

"Please, please, brother—"

"No. And I make no promises not to ruin your plans as you have never cared about ruining mine."

"You are cursing people!"

"I'll have you know, *sister*—" he said, and it sounded like a curse. I watched Ancient Ora flinch. "I have not cursed a human in a long time."

"No? What is Teddy, then?"

Ancient Draken sighed. "Besides him—"

"I will stop at nothing to end this, Draken. I will not stop until these humans are free of you," Ora said.

"Good luck with that," he said. Then with a flick of his wrist and a pop of black smoke, he was gone. It was silent for a long while. Ora had her head down—clearly upset. When she finally looked up, she spoke softly.

"You two, I am so sorry for all you have endured," she said, walking over to stand directly in front of us. "I can tell you, Rosette, that Vera was telling the truth. Your father is in the enchanted village. If you continue on the Iced Path, it will lead you there, and I shall let you and your brother enter if you wish."

"The Iced Path leads directly there?" Rosette asked, surprised, turning to me.

I laughed. "It does, but no one ever stays on the path for long, and once humans leave the path, they rarely ever make it back. I was very good at haunting them and luring them off the path."

"Thank you, Ancient Ora," Hans said to the Ancient with a bow. I had forgotten that he had been shoved back into the room.

"You are most welcome. There is much to do to bring peace back to these lands, but with each wrong righted and each curse broken, I believe we are moving into a beautiful future of peace," she said reverently.

"And my brother, Prince Ty?" I asked.

"He is in his castle; that is all I can say. I do hope to see you two reunited, someday. But for now, I can restore *your* castle and this forest to the way the Creator wished it to be."

"What about *my* people?" I asked.

"Like I said, they are scattered. Haleston is their kingdom, now."

"The people here in the forest, at least, they will be my people, now. Can you free them from their spells and enchantments?" I asked.

"Your care for them does you great credit, Prince Cole. Yes, I shall free them and right what was wronged."

“Will the forest no longer be stagnant?” I asked.

“Indeed, it will have its seasons—well, its snowy season, and that one season of light melting. This is still near Haleston, and Rora was almost always in a state of winter and snow,” Ora said with a smile and a woosh of her arm. I watched in shock as the entire castle shook around us. But instead of crumbling, the grime of hundreds of years fell away, and there was a lightness brought back inside the room that had been missing. After a few minutes, the rumbling stopped.

“Your castle is returned to you, Prince Cole. The humans once captured are freed. There is much work to do.”

“Thank you, Ora, truly,” I said with a bow.

“You both are worthy of the blessings you have now. I bless you with happiness in this union—”

Rosette interrupted. “There is no union. I barely know him—it’s only been a few days. I need some more time.”

“Rosette has a hard time accepting that love can happen so quickly, so I shall give her more time,” I said with a smirk.

“Ah yes, well, all good things take time, but sometimes, the soul and heart recognize the truth and our desires before our mind does. I am sure Prince Cole will be patient,” she said, looking at me.

“Of course, I will be patient with my little sparrow,” I nodded.

“So, then may you, Rosette, discover the love you have. May you two live in peace and good fortune from the Creator, and may you both—” she began as her blue smoke swirled around her, and she disappeared. But her voice echoed around the room:

“May you both live happily ever after.”

The End

EPILOGUE

Rosette



“**Y**ou have to wait!” He chuckled as I moved around him to reach the fire.

“Blast, this is so irritating,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

“You are a wonderful teacher,” Cole cooed.

“Yes, and you just had to learn how to do this, to do it *wrong* and irritate me.”

“Irritate you, my little sparrow? Never,” he said into my shoulder before kissing the side of my neck.

“You are going to burn those chestnuts, and I shall never forgive you,” I said faintly, finding it hard to breathe.

“I wouldn’t dare do such a thing,” he said, removing the pan from the heat.

I turned from the fireplace and walked to the red velvet sofa, taking a seat. I watched Cole as he set the pan of freshly roasted chestnuts on the stone hearth for them to cool down. He stood and walked over to me, his smirk making my insides twist.

It had been a year—a blissful year spending each day with Cole. We had ventured out in search of his brother, and we were dedicated to searching all of Haleston if it was necessary to find him. We had also been helping those who had been trapped in the forest—helping them find their families, and even building a small village where the candy village and the magical well had been.

“I smell chestnuts!” my father shouted, walking into the room. His eyes were bright as the wrinkles marked the corners of his mouth and eyes. His hair was a little gray, but he had never looked happier.

Hans came in quickly and stopped, looking at me sitting and Cole standing right beside me.

“Had to check to make sure you two were not *kissing*. Give me some chestnuts,” he said, walking to the pan.

“They are still hot!” I called. He stepped back. Father walked to the pan, and taking a poker, he moved some of the nuts around and looked to Cole.

“You could be a *Carol*. Those look perfect.”

“I am sure they are not ‘perfect’ Father,” I said, standing and poking Cole in the chest. He took my finger and kissed it, his eyes looking sweetly into mine.

I could not believe how happy my life was right then at that moment.

We had traveled through the woods upon the Iced Path to find my father. I was sure Hans would leave to be with him, but I could not leave Cole. Father was so happy to see us and had told us how he regretted leaving and worried about what had happened to us. Father left the enchanted village, and we all lived in Cole's castle. My father and Hans traveled back to our town to maintain our home and lands regularly. They also took care of the chestnut harvest, but they enjoyed our new home in the castle immensely. Perhaps, it was just the life they had been searching for. Some of the old mixed with the new.

My heart was so full, and although I was stubborn, that year had given me the clarity and peace I needed. I did, indeed, love Cole, that blasted handsome, irritating guardian who made me so happy that I could not imagine my life without him.

"Why do you look at me like that, little sparrow?" Cole asked, pulling me into his arms. He caressed my cheek.

"Ask me, Cole. Ask me," I said. The Ancient Lights began that evening, and it was the reason we were roasting the chestnuts. It was a tradition and one of my favorite evenings. It was also the day we had met, one year earlier.

"Here, now, with *them* here?" he whispered. My father and Hans were looking at the chestnuts, not at us.

"Yes," I began.

"Marry me. Marry me, Rosette. I love you, and I cannot live another day in this 'in between.' Save me from a second one?" Cole said as he removed his small golden ring from his littlest finger holding it up to me. He had spoken about the Rora tradition of giving a ring to your future bride when asking for their hand. I could not wait to wear it and be even more connected to the man I loved. I took the ring with a smile and placed it on my ring finger. It fit perfectly there. Cole grinned.

"I shall marry you, but only if you stop calling me Rosette."

"No. Cannot do it. I know you love it. Gretel does not suit you. And now you shall be a princess and need a princess-like name—"

"Ugh, this is the worst."

"Perhaps, when you were named, your mother new you would one day be in need of a delicate and beautiful name—"

"Cole!" I whined, but I *had* come to terms with my name, and I had accepted that it was okay to be fierce and small—that my size did not define me. It was not a bad thing to be slight of figure and to also have a beautiful name. But I still liked to tease Cole about it, and pretend I hated it.

"I love your name—"

"Fine," I said, then paused. He was grinning. "But I will only marry you if you do not call me 'little sparrow.'" I smirked at him.

He leaned down and kissed my mouth softly. I wanted more—so much deeper a kiss—a life with him where we would grow old together, and I would hear him call me "little sparrow" or "Rosette" for the rest of my days.

"You love it when I call you my 'little sparrow,' you maddening woman."

"Fine, but I shall be allowed to call you Collin wherever *I* desire," I said, stepping back.

"Ah! I hate that name." He groaned, placing his forehead on my shoulder. "But you can call me whatever you desire as long as you are my wife, my bride, Princess ___"

"Yes, and so we shall both have to endure our names—" But before I could say anything else, his lips pressed against mine in a dance that I wanted to never end. There was a clearing of the throat, and we broke apart.

“I am leaving,” Hans said, hurrying from the room.

“I will give you two some privacy—” Father began.

“Father! You are not worried about me being alone with him?”

“No, and for the love of the Creator, Rosette, accept the man’s hand in marriage. You are so stubborn.” Before I could argue with my father, he was out the door.

“You spoke with him?” I asked, turning to face Cole, who nodded.

“It is a custom in Rora to make one’s intentions *perfectly* clear. As soon as I met him, I told him.”

“A year ago?” I said in surprise.

“It may have taken you a while to realize your feelings for me, but my heart knew it was yours when I first saw you staring into the haunted forest.”

“What?”

“The day before you entered, I saw you standing there, glaring at the forest. You did not cower in fear, and you were so slight—” He paused.

I rolled my eyes.

“So, I was shocked to see that bravery in your eyes. I had never seen the likes of it, and I knew—my heart just knew.”

“Knew what? You could not have known we were going to fall in love.”

“Maybe I did not know exactly what it was then. So perhaps, it was the first time I called you’ little sparrow’; that, for certain, was when I knew you would become mine, and I would not stop pestering you until you were trapped in these forests forever with me. Looks like I succeeded in trapping you here.”

“So that’s what this has been? Another test? You’re trapping me here because I lost?”

“Well, some may say *you* won—I am told I am rather handsome from a certain maiden when she was spelled and half asleep—”

I shoved his shoulder.

He caught my hand and placed it over his heart. “I vowed to myself that you would be mine and live here with me. Please, my little sparrow—Rosette—Gretel if you must have me call you that—”

“I love you, Cole,” I said softly—so faintly—but it felt so wonderful to say the words I had been holding back because I feared they would make me weak.

“Say it again,” he said, pulling me to him, his eyes hungry, looking back and forth between mine.

“I love you, Collin,” I said again. that time with a smirk. He truly did not like being called Collin, so I called him that as often as I could.

“My sparrow, maddening, perfect, wonderful—”

Then his lips found mine. His kiss was everything I ever needed. I knew there in Cole’s embrace that not only would I never be abandoned again, but I would also never be underestimated, and I would be loved until the day I took my last breath, and I could not ask for anything greater.

It was true love, after all.

ALSO BY KAYLA ESHBAUGH

Love the magical land of Terra? Travel back and discover more in: The Cursed Kingdom Chronicles, the best selling fairytale retelling series on Amazon!

[True Princess](#) (*A Princess and the Pea retelling*)

[Glass Midnight](#) (*Cinderella retelling*)

[Fairest One](#) (*Snow White retelling*)

[Spindled Slumber](#) (*Sleeping Beauty retelling*)

[Sea's Secret](#) (*Little Mermaid Retelling*)

[Moonlit Wings](#) (*Swan Lake Retelling*)

And more to come!

Thank you so much for taking the time to read this story! If you enjoyed it, I would be so grateful if you would write a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Reviews help authors more than you know!

Word of mouth means so much as well. If you enjoyed this book, please tell your friends!

To stay updated sign up for my newsletter! Snag a free novella a prequel to the cursed kingdom chronicles:



Adored One, when you sign up today!

www.KaylaEshbaugh.weebly.com
Thank you so much!

THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

Check out all the other books in this fairytale Christmas themed mash up!





Author Kayla Eshbaugh

Kayla has often been told that her own real-life love story sounds a lot like a romance novel. At the age of sixteen, her brother's best friend told her that they would get married someday, and—spoiler alert—they did! Because of her personal experience, she is a firm believer that you can find true and lasting love while still in your teens, which is why she loves writing in the young adult genre. Kayla currently resides with her husband of fourteen years and their two sons in Pasadena, California. She often shares story ideas with her two sons around the dinner table, writes scene ideas on her phone, types away at her next book in her office, and watches true crime documentaries with her husband, even though she is often afraid of the dark, afterwards. She also reads novels during any spare time she has, even if it is late at night after her kids go to sleep. She loves the beach and gets her best ideas for stories while she is at the beach or when she is camping in her favorite spots. Kayla loves happily-ever-afters, along with a bit of magic, which is the reason that in her stories, you can be assured to find both!